



**Joana Margarida de  
Figueiredo Lima  
Rebola**

**Netos da Revolução: Sexualidade, Nação e Frank  
Ronan**

**Grandchildren of the Revolution: Sexuality, Nation  
and Frank Ronan**



**Joana Margarida de  
Figueiredo Lima  
Rebola**

**Netos da Revolução: Sexualidade, Nação e Frank  
Ronan**

**Grandchildren of the Revolution: Sexuality, Nation  
and Frank Ronan**

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Prof. Dr. David Callahan, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro.

## **O Júri**

Presidente

Doutor Anthony David Barker  
Professor Associado da Universidade de Aveiro

Doutor Kenneth David Callaghan  
Professor Associado da Universidade de Aveiro

Doutora Maria Filomena Pereira Rodrigues Louro,  
Professora Auxiliar do Instituto de Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade do Minho

**palavras-chave**

Estudos Irlandeses, Homossexualidade, Religião, Literatura Gay, Amizade Romântica

**resumo**

Esta tese propõe-se a investigar expressões do discurso gay irlandês contemporâneo na obra do autor irlandês Frank Ronan. O tratamento literário de temas como a influência da Igreja Católica, a importância da célula familiar irlandesa, ou a manifestação de posições políticas relacionadas com nacionalismo e colonialismo nas suas obras será analisado, com vista a examinar como estes e outros factores moldam a maneira como o discurso homossexual é construído na república da Irlanda e no trabalho de Frank Ronan em particular. Também será dada atenção a estereótipos nacionais e o seu efeito na escrita de Frank Ronan.

**keywords**

Irish Studies, Homosexuality, Religion, Gay Literature, Romantic Friendship

**abstract**

This dissertation proposes an investigation of expressions of the contemporary Irish gay discourse in the fiction of Irish author Frank Ronan. The literary treatment of themes such as the influence of the Catholic Church, the importance of the Irish family cell, or the manifestation of political views, concerning nationalism and colonialism in the novels will be analysed, in order to study how these and other factors shape the way that homosexual discourse is constructed in the Republic of Ireland and in the work of Frank Ronan in particular. Attention will also be given to Irish national stereotypes, and their effect on Ronan's writing.

# Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Legendary Children:.....</b>	<b>7</b>
Reflections on Gay Literature in Ireland	
<b>2. Prophets, Seers and Sages:.....</b>	<b>25</b>
The Influence of the Irish Catholic Church	
<b>3. Family Ties:.....</b>	<b>45</b>
The Irish Family Cell	
<b>4. Love Will Tear us Apart.....</b>	<b>67</b>
Marriages, Arrangements and Romantic Friendships	
<b>5. God Save the Queen:.....</b>	<b>93</b>
The Impact of Nationalism, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism	
<b>6. Suffragette City:.....</b>	<b>115</b>
Images of Femininity	
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>143</b>

General Rebellions and revolts of a whole people never were encouraged, now or at any time. They are always provoked.

Edmund Burke

As men are affected in all ages by the same passions, the occasions which bring about great changes are different, but the causes are always the same.

Charles de Montesquieu

In his novel *hOme* (2002), Irish author Frank Ronan has his readers looking at the world, more specifically at the intricacies of the Irish social fabric, through the innocent but highly inquisitive eyes of a child. This child, named Coorg after a honey pot, was born into a hippy community in England in the 1960s, which held the belief that cabbages screamed in pain and fear when harvested, and that Marc Bolan, the late lead singer of the English band T.Rex was something of a wizard, a prophet, even the messiah. The book begins with one of Coorg's earliest childhood recollections, which consists of being taken to a concert. There, sitting naked on the floor, he gazed at the distant stage where he could hardly make out the singer of 'Children of the Revolution', and he listened to the people around him as they explained to each other the ways in which that tiny man was about to save the world, and more importantly 'save us from ourselves' (4).

Bolan's revolution possessed a sexual character. It had to do with liberation from a biologically fixed sexuality and the power to reconfigure one's identity at will. The main idea behind the glam rock movement of the 1960s and 70s, and T.Rex in particular was precisely that freedom to express yourself through music, glitter and make up, renouncing the notion of gender as a tool of social control through the creation and fashioning of identity, especially sexual identity, beyond the usual restraints and boundaries that the idea of a fixed gender imposes.

The song 'Children of the Revolution' was written in September 1972 and was poorly received by some critics, who feared it might have something to do with communist propaganda. In reality, it is a rather straight-forward song about the power and glamour of teenage rebellion. The significance of Glam rock in Ronan's narrative, and this song's title, had me reflecting about the nature of different kinds of revolutions. The word revolution comes from the Latin 'revolutio' which means to turn around. It is a

broad and complex concept, for a revolution can be for example, political, economic, ideological, cultural, or technological in nature. Could Bolan's sexual and glitter revolution have anything to do with, for instance, the Easter Rising? At first glance, one would say no. On the other hand, there is the will, or need, to make a change, to fight for one's beliefs, to break out from restraints one considers wrongly imposed. This dissertation sets out to explore this connection, though its aim is not the study of revolutions, but of their effects. By playing with Bolan's song, updating and appropriating its words for specific purposes, the title of this thesis, 'Grandchildren of the Revolution', refers to the examination of the consequences of past revolutions that have made it possible for Frank Ronan, among others, to be able to write what can, in broad terms, be considered gay Irish literature. The word grandchildren serves to convey the necessary distance for exploring the legacy of not one, but two revolutions, both of which, each in its own specific way, became stepping stones to the foundation of nations and communities: The Easter Rising and the Stonewall riots.

The Easter Rising was undeniably a milestone in the subsequent creation of the Irish Republic, but the rebellion itself, in terms of military success, failed. It took place in the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, Easter Monday of 1916. The Irish volunteers, the Irish republic Brotherhood lead by Pádraig Pearse, and the Irish citizen Army commanded by James Connolly, attempted an uprising in order to free their country from British rule. Key locations were held by the rebels and a Republic was proclaimed, but the revolt was crushed by the English army and its leaders executed, although remembered in Ireland as martyrs and founders of the republic. Despite the blatant military failure, this rebellion managed to place the Irish on the road to independence, for the survivors of the rising, such as Michael Collins or De Valera went on to bring Ireland back to war, from 1919 to 1921. This war resulted on the two parts settling for the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, granting independence for twenty six of Ireland's thirty-two counties.

The same way the Easter Rising is considered a stepping stone in the foundation of the Irish nation, so also did the Stonewall riots mark the beginning of the gay liberation movement, serving as an initial platform for the struggle for gay rights all over the world. Stonewall Inn was a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York City, in the 1960s, a time when homophobia was ascendant and just about anything could justify or trigger an arrest on indecency charges. Raids on gay bars were fairly common, although the law had already undergone some alterations in 1966, allowing, for example, women to embrace and kiss without making it a cause for detention. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1969, a



raid was conducted at the Stonewall Inn, but later than usual, and the place was full. It quickly turned into a riot, for if gay bars were legal, there was no apparent reason for such a raid. The patrons at the bar felt discriminated against due to their sexuality and race (many of the costumers were black or Hispanic people), and the number of rioters escalated, struggling against the police and resisting arrest. It was estimated that there were around 400 policemen for a crowd of 2000. The following night there was another riot, although less violent, and before long civil rights organizations connected with the gay liberation movement started to surface and to spread, in order to fight for gay rights and respond to the way homosexuals were being treated by the police. The following year festivities were planned to celebrate the date, including a march from Greenwich Village to Central Park, which became the first gay pride parade ever and for which around 15000 people turned up. Other American cities and other countries quickly adopted this tradition and now millions of people attend such festivities, many of which are held in June, as a homage to the happenings at Stonewall.

The parallel between these two urban rebellions is the connection between nation building and community founding, giving a name and a political voice to groups of people with similar interests. One Irish author that comes to mind when thinking of homosexuality in terms of an Irish national identity is Jamie O'Neill and his novel *At Swim, Two Boys*, which tells of a love being born between two boys, at a time when both homosexual and Irish identities were under construction, presenting the Irish 1916 rebellion as a prototype of rebellions like Stonewall. This analogy of nation building is vividly present throughout the book, especially when a friend of the two boys considers to himself that he should 'help these boys build a nation of their own. Ransack the histories for clues to their past. Plunder the literature for words they can speak' (329). His concept of nation is, 'like all nations', 'a nation of the heart' (329): 'Look about you. See Irish Ireland find out its past. Only with a past can it claim a future. Watch it on tramcars thumbing its primers. Only a language its own can speak to it truly' (329).

The effort of creating a community links the construction of Irish and homosexual identities, and as identity cannot be built upon one single characteristic, these sometimes intersect and overlap. These intersecting instances are what this dissertation proposes to investigate, examining how these aspects connect and intertwine, simultaneously rejecting and embracing each other throughout history and literature. Contemporary gay Irish literature is still coming to terms with how being Irish and being gay might be conjugated together, for the homosexual experience had been silenced as nationalist

voices rose. Now, it is still trying to find its place among the literature of a relatively recently independent country, underlining Irish diversity as opposed to unity.

Frank Ronan's work makes for a useful case study for this investigation of what composes that distinctive contemporary Irish gay voice, influenced by such things as the country's post-colonial situation or religiousness and to what extent these aspects influence literature, especially if it is produced by a gay author. What makes his work so well-positioned for this is that it does not bear any specific political agenda nor does it set out to raise sympathy for the homosexual cause. Setting these things aside, it is easier to examine the manifestations of nationalism, religion, alternate sexualities, the importance of family and the construction of identity of a country whose moral and political beliefs are so strict and deeply rooted. For this purpose, the analysis of Ronan's work encompasses all of his fiction: his first novel, *The Men who loved Evelyn Cotton*, (1989) told by a tormented man, is a story of unrequited love, but also an investigation of the relationships Evelyn has throughout her life and the way she deals with them; *A Picnic in Eden* (1991), portraying the relationship of a young couple, Adam and Norah Parnell, and Adam's jealousy of his friend Dougie for having a father who committed suicide, which drives him to persuade his own emotionally absent father to do the same; 1992's *The Better Angel*, describing the development of a romantic relationship between two rural Irish boys; *Dixie Chicken* (1994) in which Ronan has God himself as the narrator of a mysterious crime (on his website, Ronan classifies this novel as a polysexual whodunit, and claims it is a book recommended for those who hold on to Christian superstitions); his provocative collection of short stories *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt* (1996); *Lovely* (1996), in which Aaron's quest for real love heads him towards a self-destructive, obsessive relationship; and finally *hOme* (2002) the story of a boy who grew up torn apart by the divergences between the teachings of the hippy commune in England who took care of him until he was six years old, and the strongly religious beliefs and moral rigidity of his grandparents who kidnapped him and brought him to rural Ireland.

In *hOme*, Ronan names all the chapters after songs by T.Rex, and there are also many other references in his other novels to other stages of musical history. Given the significance music seems to have for Ronan's narratives, sometimes even presented as a reason for certain behaviour (as in *hOme*, where Coorg feels glam rock is the adequate response to Kieran's over emphasized masculinity), most of the chapters which compose

this dissertation will also be named after songs, mentioned or somehow connected to the novels.

The first chapter is a general reflection on gay Irish literature, remembering key figures in this type of literature and the way the display of the homoerotic had to be coded in their work, and analysing the most common themes in the works of contemporary gay Irish authors. Furthermore, it seeks to unravel concepts and methodologies relevant to the discussion, such as the difference between gay studies and queer theory approaches, positions regarding the formation of a gay canon, or the debate on anachronism, evaluating social constructionist and essentialist positions. It is called 'Legendary Children', not only due to the parallel with the main title, but also because it is a song written by Holly Johnson, after he discovered he was HIV positive, as a way to honour the gay community which he claims has always supported his career, and in which he pays homage to famous homosexuals.

The following chapter features a song by T.Rex as its title, 'Prophets, Seers and Sages', proposing a reflection on how pagan Irish practices are often connected with their faith. This title is also the title of one of the chapters in *hOme*, a novel which proves to be very rich in material for the discussion of this theme. The chapter seeks out to analyse the influence of the Catholic Church on Frank Ronan and how it is expressed in the various novels and for the different characters. Although an undeniably strong presence in his work, religion is often challenged in his work, and its misdeeds exposed.

'Family Ties' is the main concern and title of the third part of this dissertation. Taken from the popular 1980s television show, its aim is to investigate relationships in what Kathryn Conrad calls the Irish family cell. Regarding this subject, Ronan's narrative obeys some of the stereotypes of the Irish family, such as the drunken father, mad mother, or the Irish mother's connection to the Catholic Church, but in other cases these stereotypes concerning family interactions are completely subverted, especially those regarding domestic roles, motherly instinct or even domestic violence.

'Love Will Tear us Apart' is the name of the fourth chapter, which proposes to deal with romantic relationships. It takes its name from the melancholic, gloomy song by Joy Division, whose records the protagonist of *The Better Angel* buys. This chapter will attempt to look into the loveless marriages, the contract-like arrangements, and obsessions in which most of the characters are engaged, marking a sharp contrast to the ways in which other characters, involved in what can be characterised as romantic relationships, interact.

The fifth section is called 'God Save the Queen' due to the many references in Ronan's work (specially on *The Better Angel*) to the British band the Sex Pistols and to Punk Rock, and, accordingly, it focuses on politics and colonialism. The name came to my mind when reading the following passage from *A Picnic in Eden*: 'the only good thing about the word queen was that it rhymed with guillotine' (135), and this chapter proposes to analyse political references and positions concerning Ireland, nationalism, and the effects of post-colonialism in the novels, albeit in the specific context of gay Irish discourse.

The last chapter is 'Suffragette City', taking its name from the David Bowie song from 1972. The main focus here lies on the depiction of femininity, in its different shapes and interpretations, by analysing the most relevant female characters in Ronan's work and also by demonstrating how important the references to Glam rock found mostly in *hOme* are in the context of gender role subversion.

While I was considering titles for this thesis, I sent a personal email to Frank Ronan, in order to find out the author's opinion on my parallel between the two above mentioned revolutions as stepping-stones for change and the formation of nations, as in groups of people with a supposed nature of their own. Before moving on to the first chapter of this dissertation, I should like to end the introduction by transcribing his words:

In both cases our cultural parents struggled to belong to the ideals of the revolutions: enacting the horrible and soul-destroying contradiction of conforming to a rebellion. It has always puzzled me that people should struggle so hard to break from the conventions of a straight society, only to mould themselves into still more rigid clones of a bent one. It should be the job of the revolutionary grandchildren to be a bit more relaxed and perhaps think for themselves. It should be, but I'm beginning to think that we humans are far better at giving the illusion of thinking for ourselves than we are at actually thinking at all. (August, 2006)

# 1

## **Legendary Children: Reflections on Gay Literature in Ireland**

This first chapter aims at discussing notions which are essential to the understanding of the specificities of Irish gay discourse, notions that have to do with the history of homosexuality and the approaches with which to study its expression in literature, as well as Irish history, and the political struggles which have shaped it. Every country's History, as presented in History books, tends to be told through a narrative of nationalism, more or less veiled depending on the country, to ensure some kind of national pride. Irish pride, however, contains elements of bitterness, and its History is often told with different shades of frustration, a narrative of successive failures with successes rare, which is mirrored in its literature.

Most critics would agree that the two most common aspects of Irish literature seem to be humour and melancholy, which combined lead to the well known Irish irony. In an online Irish author roundtable, a question was asked as to how to reconcile the two most frequent emotions in Irish literature: humour and melancholy. Irish businessman and philanthropist Bill Cullen answered that:

For the Irish the emotions of humour and melancholy are on both sides of the coin. We suffered 800 years of massacres, famines, and suppression. The melancholy was a natural reaction reflected in the poetry and mournful ballads. Humour then was used by the wise few to prevent falling into melancholy, to raise spirits and survive the tough times. The famed Dublin wit and humour was used as an antidote to the miserable conditions. (Irish Author Roundtable)

For author Thomas Moran, humour and melancholy are natural partners in Irish writing, as well as in Irish thinking: 'Given the country's tragic history, humour is a necessary counterweight to sadness and suffering which otherwise might have been unendurable' (Irish Author Roundtable). This irony is also very culturally specific, for

instead of being directed at others, it appears to be at its best when directed at Irish people themselves.

Moreover, with Irish history conceived as a centuries-long struggle for freedom, these mixed emotions supply a general discourse background that can be related to the specific struggle of homosexuals, also over centuries. Not only are we able to draw a parallel between the fight for political autonomy and the fight for ideological and sexual freedom, but we also need to take into consideration the fact that any post-colonial country will have a tendency to reinforce unity in terms of national identity, so that the exclusion of anything marginal could be reinforced when political freedom is achieved. When appealing to nationalistic feelings, the stress is never on the differences, but on the similarities and national specificities of the people of a country. Only now that the Republic of Ireland is coming to terms with such exacerbated sentiments of nationalistic union is it starting to hear the voices of those who never fitted the roles they were given, in an effort to make the construction or re-construction of the nation a matter of the inclusion of all of its different voices, rather than the silencing of those regarded as inconvenient. As Èibhear Walshe points out in *Sex Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*: ‘in Irish cultural discourse, silencing sexual difference became imperative because of a supposed link between homosexuality and enfeebled, ‘feminized’ masculinity’ (5), which is not an idea that a country which had just achieved independence would want to give. Legislation for the decriminalization of homosexuality, after all, only happened in Ireland as late as 1993.

This, of course, does not mean that gay and lesbian people have been absent from Irish political and literary history. Roger Casement, a great figure of Irish patriotism, started off by working for the British Consular Service and was sent to the Congo in 1900 to investigate allegations of atrocities against plantation workers. He was knighted for his work but what he had seen there shocked him so much that he even wrote to Joseph Conrad, after reading *Heart of Darkness*, in order to help him build a legal case against abuse of power in Congo, but Conrad refused to get involved. By 1913, Casement had switched sides and become a fervent nationalist, returning to Ireland where he was made Treasurer of the Irish Volunteers. His involvement in the Easter Rising got him arrested for treason by the English Court. Casement had kept a journal of his private life, in which he described briefly, but in graphic detail, many sexual encounters with other men, and the British government released them, after his arrest, so that what became known as the Black Diaries would ensure the lack of Irish sympathy

for Casement. Irish reaction was to reject the authenticity of the Diaries, in the belief that God forbade having a homosexual as a patriotic hero; the diaries were widely held to be a forgery on the part of the British Government. Casement was nevertheless sentenced to death in 1916.

Another important figure in Irish nationalism was Pádraic Pearse, honoured by having one of Dublin's main streets named after him, a martyr and a hero for the Irish patriotic movement, and the first president of the provisional government of the Irish Republic. He was also a scholar, deeply interested in the preservation and promotion of the Irish language, and a poet, and in his verses there is the strong suggestion of homoerotic desire. Although, of course, interpretation of poetry will necessarily remain subjective and speculative, his poem 'Little Lad of the Tricks' (1909) seems quite clear in describing same-sex attraction: 'There is a fragrance in your kiss that I have not yet found in the kisses of women or in the honey of their bodies'.

Many writers were also known to be gays or lesbians, although it is quite a different case with lesbianism for it did not constitute a crime. This might seem a good thing at first glance, but if you think about it, it speaks volumes about the role of women in Irish society. Eva Gore-Booth, for example, a writer, poet and a passionate nationalist and revolutionary, was the first woman ever elected to the Irish Parliament. She and her sister, despite their wealthy background, took to helping the poor and doing what they could to improve conditions for working class women, having even founded a suffrage society. In her older years, she lived with her life partner, Esther Roper, in Manchester, and they became joint secretaries of the Women's Textile and Other Workers Representation Committee. They were buried together under a quotation from Sappho.

Edith Somerville and Violet Martin were life and literary partners and published under the name Summerville and Ross, with the *Real Charlotte* (1894) being their best known novel. They also exchanged many letters, portraying not only their love for each other, but also giving us great insights into the Ireland of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Kate O'Brien's popularity has been increasing since her death in 1974, partly because of her treatment of feminist and lesbian themes in her novels and plays. *Mary Lavelle* (1938) includes a lesbian unrequited love as a subplot, which was enough to get the novel banned by the Irish Censorship of Publications Board. This also happened to the novel *Land of Spices* (1941), due to the depiction of a gay relationship, even though it was little more than one sentence. She also wrote about the constraints of family, and Catholic religion. In *Sex, Nation and Dissent*, Éibhear Walshe declares that

O'Brien, 'with her highly controversial profile as a censored writer, was perfectly aware that she was articulating a notion of sexual determination that would profoundly disturb Irish state control of morality' (11), and that that was why the state sought to isolate her. To a similar list, Walshe also adds Elizabeth Bowen, who wrote novels and short stories of love and uneasy sexuality, in which many critics read strong hints of homosexuality, though it was usually coded.

Lastly, there is a man whom I deliberately chose to deal with only at the end of this brief list of literary and political Irish personalities, for he alone is another reason why Irish gay literature has a different and specific feel. This man is, of course, Oscar Wilde, gay martyr and literary superstar, who has never ceased to fascinate critics and readers. I'm using the term gay martyr in the sense that his public humiliation and downfall made him extremely iconic and easy to identify with by those who lived with the fear of paying such a price for their sexual choices. There are many critics, like Geoffrey Wheatcroft, who oppose the usage of such a term, for Wilde wasn't exactly a gay activist of any kind, having even denied his homosexuality on trial. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the term is appropriate as the modern concept of homosexual had not yet been created (a notion that will be further discussed in this chapter), so that Wilde was not fully aware of what there might be to fight for, and indeed the trials ultimately gave the modern gay fight for freedom and rights something crucially important: visibility and history.

In a volume dedicated to the advances in Oscar Wilde studies, Richard A. Kaye starts his essay on 'Gay studies / Queer theory in Oscar Wilde' with the following sentence: 'If there is an author who seems to evoke today's complex and shifting sexual Zeitgeist, animating contemporary fantasies, anxieties and obsessions, it is surely Oscar Wilde' (189). The essay devotes itself to understanding the reasons for the 'widespread fascination' (190) with Wilde, and to the different approaches to the subject by scholars involved in gay studies or queer theory, but the best answer for this question comes via the words of Ed Cohen, who sees Wilde as a 'mutating signifier', in the process of the 'invention' of the modern homosexual (*Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse in Male Sexualities*). Joseph Bristow, in turn, starts off his essay "A complex multiform creature': Wilde's sexual identities' by asserting that Wilde 'addresses issues that still vibrantly preoccupy our own fin de siècle, particularly where questions of sexual identity are concerned' (195).



Alan Sinfield, in *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*, observes that: 'Wilde and his writings look queer because our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde, and our ideas about him' (vi,vii). This is an undeniably clever answer to what Bristow calls a 'painstaking discussion' (196), that concerning anachronism, for the concept of homosexuality as such did not exist at the time of Wilde's trial outside a very restricted scientific circle, with sodomy itself being perceived as a sexual act and not as behaviour or identity. This debate revolves around the works of French philosopher Michel Foucault and the view of sexuality and sexual distinctions as social constructs and therefore subject to continuous change. For Foucault, sexuality is constructed through discourse. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he attacks the common idea that in the west, sexuality has been repressed in recent centuries by asserting that, for example in the Victorian age, the Catholic practice of confession forced sexuality to be verbalized, and became thus the core of the construction and regulation of sexuality, along with the pronouncements of doctors and psychoanalysts, who set the rules for what was normal and what was not, i.e., sexual perversion. In this way, repression, through the production of discourse, also constitutes sexuality.

Furthermore, Foucault divides his study of sexuality into eastern and western, attributing the former with *ars erotica* (that is, connected to pleasure and the experience deriving from it) and the latter with *scientia sexualis* (having to do with scientific knowledge of sexuality and domination). Radhika Mohanram, for one, reads into this division that Western society is thus associated with a sexuality that has to do with power and knowledge, whereas China, Japan, India, Rome and the Arabo-Muslim societies are charged with a pleasure in relation to nothing but itself, becoming the eroticized body ('Postcolonial Spaces and Deterritorialized (Homo)sexuality: The films of Hanif Kureish).

Poet and writer Gregory Woods complains that queer theory itself is a 'source of limitations', especially due to the fact that he observes a 'slavish adherence to Foucauldian (or supposedly Foucauldian) orthodoxy' that leads to what he sees as an inhibition on the part of gay 'scholars from perusing certain kinds of social-historical and cultural historical research' ('Literary Historiography and the Gay Common Reader'). He comments that:

Michel Foucault's judicious attention to historical developments, if not strictly accurate in its details, did at least alert gay academics to the constructedness of the concept of homosexuality as an identity, dating from the late nineteenth century and emanating from Europe. Since Foucault, it has been harder for literate homosexual men to make sentimental connections between their own feelings and those of (say) Socrates or Michelangelo or Frederick the Great. ('Literary Historiography and the Gay Common Reader')

This illustrates precisely what is at the core of the debate that opposes Social Constructionists (who see sexuality as a construction) to Essentialists, who believe that it is determined by essential, or innate features. One of the Social Constructionists' main points is that the concept of modern homosexuality did not exist until the late nineteenth century. Foucault pinpoints this date as 1870 in Karl Westphal's article 'Contrary Sexual Feeling', published in *The Archive of Psychiatry and Nervous Diseases*. Though Woods's remark on Foucault's lack of accuracy refers to the fact that this article was actually published in 1869, Foucault stated that 'the sodomite had been a temporal aberration. The homosexual was now a species', for, as he explains: 'as defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts' (43) and the modern concept of the homosexual had to do with identity. As an example of the latter, from 1864 to 1868, German lawyer Karl Ulrichs had coined the word 'urnings' in his pamphlets, dedicated to the understanding of 'manly love' as natural. Hubert Kennedy in his essay 'Karl Ulrichs, first theorist of homosexuality' notes that: 'Ulrich's goal was to free people like himself from the legal, religious, and social condemnation of homosexual acts as unnatural. For this, he invented a new terminology that would refer to the nature of the individual, and not to the acts performed'. (30)

Illustration for this theory of constructedness based on cultural context can be found mainly in Michel Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*, where we learn that the Greeks of the classical period, rather than categorizing sexual activity in terms of the sex of the desired object, thus dividing homosexual from heterosexual, had different categories. Their divisions were in terms of the dominance or passivity of the desired role, meaning boys and women would both be regarded as passive, and also in terms of class ranks, so that women, adolescents or slaves were seen as inferior, and in this way the same kind of desire would be experienced, regardless of the object of lust, for the adult male would still be in the dominant, superior role.

Nevertheless, Amy Richlin points out in 'Not Before Homosexuality: the Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law Against Love Between Men':

It is true that 'homosexuality' corresponds to no Latin word and is not a wholly adequate term to use of ancient Roman males, since adult males normally penetrated both women and boys. But it is partly adequate to describe the adult male who preferred to be penetrated. An accurate analysis is that there was a concept of sexual deviance in Roman culture, which was not homologous with the modern concept of 'homosexuality' but partook of some of the same homophobic overtones our nineteenth-century coinage owns. (Not Before Homosexuality)

Richlin is writing about a figure called the *cinaedus*, and she argues that the people referred to by this term were treated in such a manner that would be easily paralleled with modern homophobia, corresponding to our notion of homosexuality. However, this isn't much of an argument, for Foucault and Halperin had also given attention to such figures. The problem with such claims is that this figure, the *cinaedus*, was in fact regarded as an effeminate man, but that had to do with an excess of desire, and lack of self control. Thus, a man could be considered effeminate, regardless of whether that excess manifested itself in the unmanly willingness to allow oneself to be penetrated or in the unmanly excessive participation in sexual relationships with women.

This serves to demonstrate how categories change over time and in different contexts and the social constructionist theory was and is extremely widespread and widely accepted. On the other hand, there are those who are vehemently opposed, arguing that homosexuality is inborn and is present in every society, at all times and places. Historian John Boswell, for one, cleverly compares our notion of homosexuality to our recognition of the law of gravity. The Greeks did not have a concept for this either, but they did describe it. In the same fashion, there is no need for a specific notion of homosexuality, in order to prove its existence. Boswell also points out that if the theory of historical constructedness is entirely true, then there would be no gay history, for it would not be possible to group people with the same traits throughout the ages.

Another of this theory's most vocal opponents is historian Rictor Norton, who points the finger at Social Constructionism for bearing a political agenda, through Marxist and Maoist analysis. He claims that Social Constructionists 'maintain that significant shifts took place in the nineteenth century, because their political theory requires them to have taken place as part of the dialectics of revolution', accusing it of seeming to be based 'on nothing and to have lead nowhere in the past twenty years' (*A Critique of Social Constructionism and Postmodern Queer Theory*). He goes as far as regarding Social Constructionism as the main impediment for the understanding of Queer Theory. He dismisses it as failing to recognize the 'difference between attitudes

towards homosexuals and the experiences of queers' and reminds us to distinguish between 'queer persons, queer sexual acts and behaviour, and queer social interactions, and try not to confuse the constancy of desire with the variability of its expression'. Furthermore, he adds:

Its initial premises have been constantly reinforced by restatement and incestuous quotation among constructionist colleagues rather than supported by scholarly research. The approach quickly became authoritarian and totalitarian insisting that only one method be used and that certain questions not be asked. (*A Critique of Social Constructionism and Postmodern Queer Theory*)

Author and social critic Camille Paglia considers that 'the Seventies suffered from an intellectual vacuum, which was filled by a narrow, blinkered social Constructionism', which she describes as 'the simplistic behaviourist belief that nature does not exist, that everything we are comes from social conditioning' (*Vamps & Tramps*, 20). In addition, Foucault is depicted as a 'glib game-player who took very little research a very long way, was especially attractive to literary academics in search of a short cut to understanding world history, anthropology and political economy' (*Vamps & Tramps*, 99).

Personally, I think these conflicting ideologies are being blown out of proportion to the extent that they are becoming categorical and semantical traps, and it seems that different things are being discussed. One should be more attentive to Foucault's own words when he reminds us that we're dealing with 'discursive facts' only:

The central issue (...) is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all discursive fact, the way in which sex is put into discourse. (11)

Furthermore, I believe one should be more careful in discerning whether the issue in question is attempting to find what something is or how it has been viewed through time, attitudes and experiences. It boils down to the philosophical question of: if a specific something does not have a specific name, does it exist? The ways something has been viewed throughout different ages do not necessarily mean that something has also changed. Another strong point for the essentialists is to make the case for the need of gay

history, in order to create a sense of collective identity and thus to aid in overcoming oppression. While there is much truth in this, it is also true that it is a very personal and individual choice to find your own role models, which do not really need an official label from accepted history to mean something to you.

In addition, one should be suspicious when dealing with categories. Modern or not, I do not think the categories we have at present are particularly helpful. Even the word 'gay', for instance, appears to be too encompassing. In an interview on '*My Own Private Idaho* and the new queer road movies', film director Gus Van Sant observes that:

One thing I figure, a person's sexual identity is so much different from just one word, 'gay'. You never hear anyone referred to as just 'hetero'. If you're 'hetero' that doesn't really say anything, and that's why people don't say it. If you're gay, that also isn't saying anything. You'd have to qualify it more. It's too broad a thing. There's something more to sexual identity than just a label like that. (251)

While with the word 'homosexual' one tends to consider the nature of a person's sexuality, it seems that with the word 'gay' it is being assumed that your sexuality is your most important feature, that it sums up everything about your identity. It should be clear that the identities of a man who simply likes other men sexually, and a man who wants to be or act like a woman, should not be encompassed by the same word. Moreover, one's attitude to one's gender position is also crucial. In Frank Ronan's work, for instance, all gay men in the stories are people who are not at odds with their sexuality or their gender. There is no cross dressing, no inner desire to be like the other sex, nothing of the sort. It is solely a matter of sexual preference, which does not mean it is the main trait of anyone's identity. So while I tend to agree with some of the essentialist line of reasoning about the naturalness of different forms of human sexual inclination, which allows me to group certain people together for academic purposes in terms of these sexual inclinations, this is an aspect of identity that I am extrapolating for the purposes of this work, and should not be understood as a totalising description of writers' or characters' identities.

As asserted before, views of homosexuality have changed over time. In the past, most of the efforts of gay studies theorists had to be put into reading homosexuality that had been represented in more or less coded language, in authors and at a time when it could not be openly flaunted. Now, by studying contemporary authors the perspective will unavoidably have to shift, in order to focus on what is being said, or not said, and

the different reasons for this. Reed Woodhouse, in his work towards constructing a suitable canon of gay fiction, *Unlimited Embrace*, when discussing the need for gay literature to become more realistic, less victimizing, and to put more focus on other parts of every day life other than sex, writes about what he believes the effort of a gay writer should be put into:

Gay men are ‘unspeakable’ – strange, dangerous, revelatory – and the challenge to the gay writer is knowing how to incorporate the ‘unspeakable’ into art, to make it beautiful. He must not make it beautiful by ignoring it or trivializing, but by using it, finding a form for it. (10)

In this sense, with the modern world coming to terms with homosexuality and its literature, the job for contemporary gay writing has been to find its own form, free of some of the distorting pressures of the past. In Ireland, this has been done, with literature addressing topics of specific homosexual experience, such as coming out issues, aids concerns, or the formation of a gay consciousness, but in an Irish context, which means that these issues are discussed without forgetting politics or religion, and drawing different pictures of Ireland. Contemporary gay Irish writing is involved in a renegotiating of identity and its part in the country. Coming out, of course, is one of the subjects most focused on in any kind of modern gay literature, for many reasons, one of which is that by writing such an account, not only does one accept and verbalize one’s own sexuality, but also, if not more importantly, one creates a language through which other people can identify similar problems. A lot of different coming out collections are being edited all over the world, so that young gay men and lesbians might not feel so confused and that they may be able to draw ideas from, thus challenging the heterosexuality brainwashing people are usually subjected to.

Colm Tóibín refers to his birthplace in Ireland as the kind of place ‘where people’s lives could be ruined by an open display of homosexuality. It was clear to me’, he says, ‘as I grew into my teens that being gay in this country would require care and attention’ (*Love in a Dark Time*, 250). It is fascinating, thus, to read coming out narratives in Irish collections, such as *Coming Out: Irish Gay Experiences*, edited by Glen O’Brien, and to realize to what extent most of the doubts that are put forward in them are intertwined with Catholic concerns. Most of the writers in this book refer to the nonexistence of information about homosexuality as they were growing up, which made this process necessarily more complicated and generally painful. One of the contributors to this

collection, Geoff McGraff, illustrates his difficulty in coming out of his closet and highlights that this 'complete acceptance of myself would mean giving up the mapped-out life that heterosexually offered' (213). Nevertheless, further on in the narrative, it was not until he told his parents that he felt that his 'house suddenly became home' (215). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a highly reputed gender studies theorist, analyses and problematizes the concept of the closet and the space it represents. She regards it as a fundamental part of gay life and as the defining structure for gay oppression in this century. But the closet is a space of secrecy, and being in the closet is most often made easier due to the fact that for most people heterosexuality is so taken for granted as the default orientation that other people's sexuality is not questioned in the absence of clear indications to the contrary.

Obviously, coming out literature does not necessarily have to be biographical and many contemporary Irish novelists deal with such issues in their fiction. Emma Donoghue's novel *Stir-Fry* (2001) is about a young woman coming to grips with the fact that her two housemates are a lesbian couple, and learning new things about her own sexuality on the way. Tom Lennon's novel *When Love Comes to Town* (1993), is another example of a college boy's progression into maturity, in which he has to give up his efforts to make himself appear more masculine, and leave the rugby star attitude behind, to plunge into Dublin's nightlife, even getting beaten up, but eventually he does come of age and becomes slowly at ease with the people around him, the people he meets along the way, and himself. Colm Tóibín in *Coming-Out: Irish Gay Experiences*, sees the need for this type of story as the 'thin faint line that connects us with those of earlier generations, who lived happily despite everything or suffered in silence for the sin of being themselves, is a line we need to trace with greater definition on our road to liberty' (11). Many of Tóibín's characters struggle to come out, and to find their place in hostile and repressive societies, as in *Blackwater Lightship* (2001) and *The Story of the Night* (1996). Though *The Story of the Night* is set in Argentina, it deals with the same kind of oppression one would find in Ireland. Richard, the main character, hides his sexuality from his mother, and when she dies, he carries on hiding it from a society that is anything but permissive, despite the fact that throughout the narrative both Richard and his country suffer profound changes.

These two novels also deal with Aids and the loss of loved ones. Since the beginning of the epidemic in the early eighties, and given the fact that in the beginning, the first cases to appear were of gay or bisexual men, these were also the first to take it

on as a literary subject. The idea was to make people wake up and realize the seriousness of the situation, and to make them aware of the suffering going on. Even upon confirmation that this disease could in fact infect anyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, this kind of literature remained still, apparently, a prerogative of gay writing, constituting what Woodhouse calls 'gay fiction's boom industry' (13), though he admits that it is likely to be coming to an end, not only because it is 'no longer a gay preserve', but also due to the discovery of new medications and treatments. P. P. Harnett is another Irish author who expresses such concerns, for instance in his graphically sexual novel *Call Me* (1996), in which Liam, a gay man who had recently lost his lover, sets upon a strange quest to find meaning for his empty life.

It is interesting to note that in Frank Ronan's work, however, such questions are not tackled. One thing that comes to mind, every time I re-read his work, is that as far as these issues are concerned his writing seems to take place in a partly-idealised world in which some of these problems have already been overcome, or that he makes a conscious effort not to go for the over-used and easy approach. Both coming out issues and Aids literature deal mostly with subjects of intolerance and homophobia, against which they are engaged in a slow battle. Most gay characters in such books are represented in terms of the best possible characteristics so that the reader might empathize with and engage in their cause. In direct correspondence with the author, I asked Ronan about these matters, using his book *Lovely* as an example. In *Lovely*, it is not a matter of struggle against or acceptance in the straight world, but the portrayal of a relationship between two characters, with all their qualities and flaws, and therefore, not turning any character into a victim. I questioned him whether it would be fair to assume that the lack of the themes of coming out of the closet or struggling for acceptance in his book was intentional, for as Ailbhe Smyth puts it: 'tangible social and political change is never achieved without the ability to imagine the world otherwise' (*Alternative Loves: Irish Gay and Lesbian Stories*, VII). The answer I got was the following:

Yes, of course. Since Gilgamesh, literary fiction has looked beyond the world of fairy stories with good goodies and bad baddies. Quite aside from the fact that coming-out stories with sympathetic characters make dull books (both from a reader's and a writer's point of view), it doesn't move the argument on either. Which is more likely to work: 'Don't hate me because I'm better than you,' or 'Don't hate me, I'm just as flawed as you.'? Having said that, I should also say that I did not set out with a political agenda. A book that is intended to improve the reader's mind will only appeal to minds that are dead already. (August, 2006)



What is noteworthy about gay Irish writing, as I mentioned earlier, is that it never strays far from politics and religion, whether it is engaging in the topics mentioned above or any other kind of homosexual experience. In Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast In Pluto* (1998), we read the story of Patrick, a foster boy brought up in a conservative Irish town in the 1970s. He knows he is different from a very early age, but he does not let anyone change him, and eventually flees to London, hoping to find his mother and a more gay-friendly place. Turning himself into an androgynous being called Kitty, he gets involved with a married politician (a glam rock musician in the movie adaptation) who is smuggling guns for the I.R.A. The novel deals with it all: terrorism, I.R.A. violence, oppression, prostitution, abortion, and of course, Catholicism, for although Father Bernard is very supportive towards Kitty, he also turns out to be his real father, and the reason why his mother ultimately abandoned him and left town. The novel has been recently adapted for the big screen by fellow Irishman Neil Jordan, who has also directed and written *The Crying Game* (1992), which, in the midst of many twists, deeply questions the notion of identity, whether sexual, racial or national. Very roughly, the plot revolves around an I.R.A. soldier named Fergus, in charge of executing a member of the British Army called Jodi; Fergus deserts his terrorist friends and ends up falling into the arms of Jodi's girlfriend, who, after all, turns out to be a man.

Not even in erotic short stories do political concerns cease to be expressed. An Irish collection of such erotic short stories is *Chasing Danny Boy*, edited by Mark Hemry, who proclaims gay writing as the hidden literature of Irish culture. There are many contributors to the volume, including Neil Jordan, and the very first story, 'Puppydogs' Tails', written by Michael Wynne, paints a vivid picture of a young boy's first sexual encounter, over four pages. The last two paragraphs, however, are devoted to the other boy's telling him of his desire to join Sinn Fein and to the narrator's discovery, four years later, that the boy was shot at point-blank range, at the age of twenty-two. Another story, Kevin Beliele's 'Love's Sweet Sweet Song', involves the narrator and a drag queen he meets on a June night in Dublin. Written in a rather Joycean stream of consciousness style, sex, politics and religion show up in almost every sentence:

Even in a dress and makeup, smelling like sex and roses, such a hot man! Catholic and Fenian, by God, this boygirl on my knob freeing the Irish kick ass from British rule is only half the troubles! Her tongue in the red brick leaf green wet twilight mixing into the fight gays, homosexuals, bisexuals, drags, TVs, all oppressed, just like the Irish. (56)

As literature changes, so does literary criticism and theory also change, for they have to do with the analysis and evaluation of texts, and their meaning in a number of different contexts. New practices relating to forms of viewing texts that deal with sexual difference have arisen since the 1970s and 1980s, such as Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory, which though interconnected, differ from each other in terms of methodology. Gay Studies is a product of the Gay Rights Movement, in the same way that the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement gave birth to similar theoretical approaches. It privileges historical and cultural factors and its early stage developed from Social Constructionist Theory and Michel Foucault and uses history, literature and science to shed a more positive light on homosexuality, relying on recuperative and celebratory criticism. Although it evolved from Social Constructionist assumptions, it also incorporates essentialist ideas, in what Richard Kaye calls its insistence on the salutary nature of writing by self identified homosexuals, or its notion of an imaginary shared history, a notion that can be quite problematic to sustain ('Gay Studies / Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde'). Another problem with this approach is that its goal seems to be the creation of a gay canon, a mission I must confess to having some trouble with. A need for a History, I can easily understand, illustrated in Tóibín's foreword to his work *Love in a Dark Time*:

Other communities who have been oppressed – Jewish people, say, or Catholics in Northern Ireland – have every opportunity to work out the implications of their oppression in their early lives. They hear the stories; they have the books around them. Gay people, on the other hand, grow up alone; there is no history. There are no ballads about the wrongs of the past, the martyrs are all forgotten. It is as though, in Adrienne Rich's phrase "you looked in the mirror and saw nothing". Thus, the discovery of a history and a heritage has to be made by each individual as part of the road to freedom, or at least knowledge, but it also has serious implications for readers and critics who are particularly concerned about gay identity, and also has its dangers. (13)

I can also relate to the grouping of authors for study purposes, for, as Elaine Showalter argues in the context of women's writing: 'when women are studied as a group, their history and experience reveal patterns which are almost impossible to perceive if they are studied only in relation to male writers' (9). But it seems to me that this focus on the construction of canons tends to circumscribe literature in a way which I find somewhat contradictory to its goals. David Bergman starts his essay on 'The Gay and Lesbian Presence in American Literature', with the following statement:

Unlike African American literature or Asian American literature or even Jewish American literature, the teaching of lesbian and gay literature does not necessarily require opening the canon to new authors. It does require, however, opening our eyes to what is already there. I can't imagine teaching a course in American literature that entirely eliminated all lesbian and male homosexual writers. ('The Gay and Lesbian Presence in American Literature')

Likewise, I find that the focus should lie on the different perspectives in which you can or should study and read the actual canon (no matter what country or type of canon). To confine all these authors to a specific canon seems to me to be ghettoizing 'gay culture' and asserting its distinction from 'straight culture'. It seems preferable to place the emphasis on including rather than on excluding or differentiating. There is also the question of the definition of a gay movie or a gay novel: does it involve being written by a gay person or does it have to represent a gay/ lesbian protagonist?

Bruce Bawer, in an article trying to consider whether gay culture is something innate and if every gay man would agree on the same icons of such a culture, also has something to say on the issue of a gay canon:

It's also confining, for there's no part of the cultural landscape without a gay element. Even if gays constitute as much as fifteen percent of the population, the gay contribution to Western art, architecture, music, and literature far exceeds what it should be statistically. If you accept the right-wing claim that only one in a hundred people is gay, then the gay contribution is truly extraordinary. Think about it: A group comprising one percent of the population producing Erasmus, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Marlowe, Bacon, Hölderlin, Hans Christian Andersen, Tchaikovsky, Proust ... the list goes on and on to include three of the four major nineteenth-century American novelists, one (perhaps both) of the two great nineteenth-century American poets, and two of the three most noted mid-twentieth-century American dramatists. The immensity of the debt that Western civilization owes to gay and lesbian genius is pretty ironic, given that homosexuality is often described as a threat to Western civilization by those strangest of allies, the culturally philistine religious right and neo-conservative intellectuals. ('Canon Fodder')

David Bergman also makes the interesting point that it is easier to slip homoerotic content into the canon in verse:

It seems to me that poets--maybe because of the example of Whitman--have been and continue to be more up front about sexual issues than prose writers, or at least more able to get their homosexual and lesbian works into anthologies. Part of the reason is the different ways people react to prose and poetry. A friend of mine has for decades written highly confessional poems without objection, but when he came to write a memoir, a chorus of former friends rose up in opposition, and threatened to sue him. In verse,

homosexuality can be read as merely metaphor; in prose it appears pornographic. (One sees the same sort of difference between painted and photographed nudes). ('The Gay and Lesbian Presence in American Literature')

Once something is labelled as normal, then its opposite will immediately be regarded as abnormal. Gay studies seek to understand how these labels operate and investigate the ways in which they are enforced. Queer theory focuses on the subversion of all these categories. Gregory W. Bredbeck, in an article entitled 'Literary Theory: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer', published online on 'glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture', uses Gayle Rubin's distinction of gender in sexual difference to explain that:

Gay theory examines sexual difference as it is applicable to the male gender; lesbian theory examines sexual difference as it is applicable to the female gender; queer theory attempts to examine sexual difference separate from gender altogether, or with a radical deprivileging of the status of gender in traditional discourses. ('Literary Theory: Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture')

Which means that whereas gay studies investigate different identities, Queer Theory seeks to study these differences in order to subvert the very notion of identity. The phrase Queer Theory was first used in 1991 by Teresa de Lauretis in an essay called 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities', published in the journal *Differences*. The idea behind this approach to theory has precisely to do with this term, in the sense that the whole purpose is to *queer* the way we view and practice criticism, through challenging the supposed normality of heterosexuality and presenting it as none the less deviant. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the most prominent figures in queer theory and gender studies, observes that the analysis of desire is one of the most effective ways of destabilizing the assumptions behind the construction of both gay and straight identities.

To sum up, this chapter has sought to introduce to this investigation various discussions concerning ways to look at and examine contemporary Irish gay discourse. Firstly, it was shown how post-colonial issues are relevant, for nationalism in Ireland deals with strong ideas of independence and the struggle for freedom, but at the expense of intentionally overlooking certain aspects, such as almost every manifestation of an alternate sexuality, in an effort to make this newly independent nation appear stronger. However, this did not prevent certain writers, such as Kate O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen or Oscar Wilde, from expressing themselves, although they were only able to do it through coded messages and insinuations. But to call these writers gay writers leads us into the

debate of anachronism and of how appropriate it really is to label them as something which did not exist at the time, in the same conceptual sense as today. In order to analyse this problem, different social constructionist and essentialist theories were briefly discussed. Moving on from the history of gay discourse to modernity, the world's view of homosexuality is constantly changing, as well as its literature along with the approaches in which to study it. In this chapter, two different methodologies of literary criticism were addressed: gay studies, which aims to look into the expression of different identities and genders, and Queer Theory, which seeks to destabilize these notions altogether. It is within the framework of Queer Theory analysis that some of the themes in Frank Ronan's work that have to do with the construction or deconstruction of identity will be addressed and examined. The next chapter will deal with one of the most significant of these - religion and the effects of the Catholic Church of Ireland in these constructions.



## 2

# **Prophets, Seers and Sages: The Influence of the Irish Catholic Church**

We were serious and dutiful, knowing that we had been chosen carefully not only because of our families' position in the town but because of something the priests had noticed about us, a lack of rebellious spirit perhaps, a willingness to bow our heads during religious ceremonies and an ability to go straight home when they were over.

Colm Tóibín

Throughout History, religion has often been responsible for the persecution of those with different ideals and lifestyles. When it comes to homosexuality, the influence and the liability of the Roman Catholic Church with respect to the lack of tolerance towards and harassment of people living an alternative sexuality is undeniable. Moreover, in the Irish case particularly, this becomes even more of a problem, due to the way Irish people tend to view and experience Catholicism.

When arguing for the subtle, distinctive flavour of Irish gay discourse, as a result of its cultural specificities, one clearly notes that the predominant specificity is the direct influence and pressure of the Irish Catholic Church. By specificities, it is not meant, of course, that this predicament is in any way particular to Ireland, but what is, in fact, almost unique is the level of religious belief, that is among the highest in Europe and possibly the world. The Church extended its power over education, health and social welfare, thus dominating all spheres of social behaviour. According to a survey conducted by Tom Inglis in his *Moral Monopoly, The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (1987, revised in 1998), more than nine in ten of the population identify themselves as Church members. He observes that 'the majority of Irish people are born, marry and die within the Church' (17) It is this 'identification' as a member of the Catholic Church and the ability to believe its dogmas without questioning

them that has led to the bitterness and resentment of Irish gay literature towards such an institution, and the effect it has had on the private lives of the authors can be clearly observed in their writings.

The quote at the top of the page was taken from Tóibín's introduction to *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), where he draws from his personal experience, of having been brought up in a rural town in Ireland, to account for the reasons that led him to write about the language of homosexuality and the lives of gay writers. He had been asked by *The London Review of Books* to write an article on what he thought would be Irish literature, but turned it down on the spot when he realized they wanted him to address his own homosexuality. Although Tóibín notes that at the time he was already in the process of writing *The Story of the Night*, in which his leading character is gay, he felt somewhat 'protected' setting it in Argentina, and believed that his own sexuality, echoing that of his character, was something that remained 'uneasy, timid and melancholy'. (*Love in a Dark Time*, 5) The editors' method of alluring him was to send him books by gay authors and Tóibín could not resist starting to make connections between those who had 'broken the silence that has surrounded our lives for so long' (8). 'I realized', he tells us, 'that certain writing done in the hundred years between the trial of Oscar Wilde and the rescinding of The Victorian laws against homosexuality in Ireland raised fascinating questions'(6).

When analyzing Irish homosexuality in writing, whether coded or more explicit, it is also easy to fall into that dot-connecting scrutiny, and there is one dot that is impossible to avoid: the presence of the Irish Catholic Church and the way it affects the expression of sexuality in literature. The opening quote refers to Tóibín's experience as an alter boy and underlines brilliantly the way priests rewarded qualities such as 'the lack of rebellious spirit' and the 'willingness to bow our heads'. The power of a Church lies in its followers' ability to ask as few questions as possible. In this way, it worked as a 'fundamental force that shaped Irish society' (253), through setting the rules by which to live and deal with each other. This unquestioning of the rules and uncritical devotion was the key to attaining moral respectability, and especially in the rural parts of Ireland this kind of respectability was crucial to social survival. The closing chapter of Tóibín's book is called 'Good-bye to Catholic Ireland', where he examines Catholicism and the way it dominated the civilizing process in Ireland by carefully demarking the barriers of right or wrong, of adequate and unacceptable. Within this analysis, Tóibín considers Inglis' book and Micheál Mac Gréal's *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland* (1977) as the best accounts



of the consequences of Catholicism in his country, also because he confesses to have experienced many of the phenomena these books describe. Both works deal with the enormous amount of power that the Catholic Church of Ireland was capable of accruing over the centuries and that is only recently beginning to decline. Recently refers to the 1970s onwards, as sexual revolutions took hold, traditional nuclear families decreased, as well as the number of priests, women started working and ceased to regard child-bearing as their only goal, and the media started to promote knowledge and information and hosting public debates on issues that until then were not presented as valid alternatives, making people start to raise questions about how much of their beliefs were, in fact, their own. However, authors writing now often describe childhood episodes or their relationship with their parents, thus referring to times when this decline had not yet happened to such an extent.

What makes Irish Catholics different from Catholics in other Western European societies is the high level of institutional adherence to the Church (especially in terms of sacramental attendance), the persistence of many magical and devotional practices, and the general acceptance of the Church as a legislator and arbiter of morality. (38)

All the way through Frank Ronan's entire body of work, the mark of the Catholic Church is clearly visible. His book *hOme* (2002) tells the story of a little boy who was brought up in a hippy community in England and then kidnapped by his grandparents and brought, at the age of six, to the strict religious rules and regulations of life in rural Ireland, which he has a rather hard time understanding. The boy, Coorg, renamed Joseph on his arrival at New Ross, Ireland, for Coorg sounded like a girl's name and he should have a Christian name, is the narrator of story, written in a fairy-tale manner, and seen through his non judgemental, naïve eyes. His first impression of New Ross was of a place that 'loomed over the River Barrow with all the luck draining down the hill and into the sluggish water' (87), where the people were supposed to hate their neighbours of the town across the bridge, and where the words you used to describe yourself as an inhabitant would be meant as an insult if uttered by anyone else. New Ross was famous for having a curse and jokes around town warned visitors that the best thing about the place was the road out of there, which made the child conclude that all of its residents must have been somehow trapped.

From his kidnapping by his grandparents until his arrival, the boy kept asking question after question in order to grasp the significance of everything he sees, for it is

all completely new to him, although all his questions are heavily discouraged. During the trip, he is given a kind of crash course by his grandmother on the Catholic Church and the behaviour he is expected to have in certain situations.

‘You’ve heard the word of God now and you’ve no excuse. Your heathen days are over. If you died while you were still a heathen you’d just go to limbo, but if you die now and have a mortal sin on your soul you’ll go to hell, and there’s nothing you can do about it.’ She described hell to the best of her knowledge, and said that if I didn’t want to go there I had to pray to God and his mother all the time until the day I died, which could be any minute. I somehow found that I had run out of questions or, at least, lost the desire to know any more. We were on the shady side of the street and the town was shouldering in around us. (87)

This passage gives a helpful insight into the matter of the uncritical acceptance of the Church dogmas. The boy comes to a point when there’s so much fear instilled in him, that no more questions need to be asked for more knowledge would only result in more regulations to follow and more punishments to be eligible for. It is also noteworthy to observe that it is only after religion has entered his life that he feels the town ‘shouldering in’ (87), as if creating a weight on his shoulders he had not yet known.

The smothering repressiveness of this state of events is made even more evident given the stark contrast towards the beginning of the book. Coorg was born within a hippy commune where freedom was the word of the day, in terms of sexual, and social behaviour. It is not as if the community had no religious feelings at all, but rather drug coloured interpretations of glam rock songs and passages from *The Lord of the Rings*. They looked upon the figure of Marc Bolan (the lead singer of T-Rex) as a form of great wizard, a messiah coming to ‘stop the wars and the money and make the children happy’, by ‘chanting to bring in the new age’ (3). This unconventional and surreal account serves to suggest that there are other, less restrictive ways to experience spirituality, such as through a beautiful song, sung by Bolan’s child-like voice, and his spell-like, dizzy lyrics.

The people in the community made decisions based upon readings of an I Ching oracle, consisting of a bunch of stalks that had to be laid on the ground and read. When Coorg was born (and named after a pot of honey), one of the stalks broke, which made the community assume that the child would have special powers and also be some form of mage, and would eventually become Merlin, replacing Bolan and taking on the quest of saving the world. This burden of being led to believe that sometime in his future he

would be responsible for stopping war was also pressuring the child, but he had never understood the meaning of pressure as when lying in his bed in Ireland trying to comprehend what it was exactly that people seemed to expect from him.

They make you think that it is your duty to save the world, and just as you are coming to terms with the burdens of sainthood or messiahship or whatever it is they have in mind, the likes of David Bowie are sent along to rattle you out of it. It was nearly as bad as when I was supposed to be Merlin and everyone kept saying that the establishment would try to track me down, except of course that that was pagan times and fairytales and the fear then was nothing like the fear in me now. Could you measure the amount of truth in something by the degree of fear it inspired in you? Whether you could or not, I did. (118)

Again, this is a very interesting take on how the strategy of the Catholic Church is to instil fear in its followers. And it is not only the fear of Hell or punishment, as in the quote above, but rather that you are supposed to fear God Himself. The child ends up realizing that he is converting out of fear, and that that is the only measure of truth that makes sense. Coorg said his prayers every night and slept with his arms across his chest, just to be on the safe side. These prayers, he also explains to us, did not count if they were said lying warm in bed, for one needs to be kneeling. Slowly, he started getting into the scheme of things, though things are never properly explained; about everything that he is supposed to avoid, he is only told that it is the Devil's work:

The Devil lurked in all sorts of places. He hid in mirrors and could jump out at you if you stayed looking at yourself too long. You had to give a quick glance to make sure your face wasn't dirty, because dirt was the Devil's friend. There was a great deal of the Devil's work also on the television. When two people started kissing each other on the mouth you were told to look away while everyone else clucked and said that there was no call for that sort of behaviour. If a woman on the telly had a dress that was low at the front, or a woman in the street had a short skirt like they all wore in England, she was doing the Devil's work for him. The Devil loved nudity, and when you went to bed at night you had to be careful to change into your pyjamas without exposing yourself. (97)

It is very evident from this quote, as well as the whole book, that the boy is left in total ignorance of why he should avoid certain behaviours; he is merely inculcated with feelings of guilt, shame and worry. A parallel between Coorg's inner conflicts and the very first pages of Inglis' aforementioned book is too vivid not to be noticed: 'We did not talk much about religion', he makes very clear in the introductory chapter, 'we practised it' (1). A few paragraphs later he declares that: 'But those days were not just

filled with innocent bliss. They were filled with fear. I knew I was a sinner and I dreaded the thought of dying with a mortal sin on my soul and being condemned to the fires of hell for all eternity' (1-2). He asserts that people were actually discouraged from asking questions concerning religious matters or the priesthood, and he goes as far as explaining that one would be more easily forgiven for breaking the rules than for questioning them. Like Inglis, so also does Coorg live in the terror of doing something wrong, especially because most of his potential sins are somehow beyond his comprehension. But the way the Catholic Church of Ireland set the rules, one had no need to ask questions. One simply had to follow them, and thus the Catholic logic structured the way Irish people viewed the world around them, and organised their life, because, as we can deduce from Coorg's words, it was already laid out before them, with little alternative. At least, if one wanted to maintain some kind of social status, for another point that comes across in the book is that the main reason why the young people in the story want to go to England was because in the place where they were born, everybody knew each other, making it extremely hard for any one to get away with any form of dissidence or alternative thinking or lifestyle. His uncle P.J. confides to Coorg later on in the book the real reason why everybody wants to go to London: 'You can pick and choose who you want to talk to. You can be left alone if you want. It's not like living in a goldfish bowl like this place. Everyone you see is a stranger'(198). Coorg ends up concluding that he is not interested in strangers, for he already has enough trouble with the people he knows.

Ronan has a wonderful way of mixing up the boy's most innocent remarks with serious reflections, never veering from his distinct witty and defiant style, in telling this unconventional tale. One night after all the prayers, the boy is lying in bed, trying to figure out why should God be loved without further justifications.

A thought like that would bother me. They were always saying how important it was to love God independently of any desire for personal salvation, otherwise your faith would be judged insincere and you wouldn't be saved, but what other motive could you have for loving him purely? It wasn't exactly as if he was taking you out and buying you ice-pops on his day off. And even if he did there'd still be a secret bit of you that hoped being palsy with the boss man was going to get you into heaven. The only way to overcome the whole mess was by sainthood. But could you qualify to be a saint if your primary motive had been to save yourself? (114)

Here, the reader is once again forced to question, along with the child, the dogmas of the Catholic Church and the things one is almost compelled to believe, without

understanding why or how. In Ireland, the explanation for the power of the Church comes from its dominance of almost every other field of social life, due to its organisational strength, controlling not only the churches, but the schools and the hospitals. Inglis states that ‘there has been no institution in Irish society that has had the same level of organisation and depth of resources as the Catholic Church’ (39), which made possible for the Church to be ‘able to limit what Irish people said and did’ (39). Due to large economic resources, the Church owns vast areas of land and buildings, which made it easier to supervise its congregation if the people spent most of their time on Church or Church-owned grounds. Health was also strongly connected to the Church, which meant that it had control over the body and bodily functions as well, in terms of how the body should work, and how much one needed to know about one’s own body. This was particularly limitative to women, for it gave the Church unlimited power to rule over the bodies of Irish women, instructing them on how to proceed with respect to marriage, divorce, intimacy, abortion, pregnancy and contraception. Thus, all knowledge came from the Church, and there was little way of finding out more. The media at the time was not much help, for the Church, as well as the State, censored television programs, books and newspaper articles, in order to impose moral order and to control information. Coorg is very clear throughout the story about his passion for glam rock, and he complains that ‘RTE could be depended on to keep our screen free of the cross-dressing incubi that passed for musicians across the water’ (116). All Coorg was able to get his hands on were imported magazines where he could read and dream about the glittery glam rock scene.

Another effective way to successfully inculcate religious rules from the start was to have a hold over the education system. In this way, as well as, again, controlling the administration of selected information, Church teachings were also implanted from the very beginning. Inglis also adds to this, by pointing out that such teachings were not only able to reach into the home, supervising the mother in her raising of the children, but that segregated schooling perpetuated traditional family life and defined gender roles. Furthermore, he draws attention to the fact that the main work of religious orders in Ireland, half of whom are Christian Brothers, has been in teaching. In *hOme*, there are also many references to Christian schools. Coorg’s primary school was run by nuns, and in his last year he learned Irish until aged twelve, followed by religious instruction until dinner time. Once more, there is nothing instructive about the course he describes, for it

consisted of their reading in silence of a religious magazine called *The Messenger*. He also paints a rather illustrative picture of his first years at school:

The school had three classrooms. The first contained infants and baby infants, and was taught by Sister Marina, a fat and untroubled woman, who might have had trouble maintaining discipline among older children, but found it easy to instil the necessary terror and silence into the tots in her domain. The middle classroom was taught by Miss Lacey, a nun in all but uniform as far as discipline and corporal punishment were concerned. She differed from the virgins either side of her in that she took the trouble to teach reading and writing and arithmetic, whereas the sisters stuck to less controversial subject of religion, Irish and music. (122)

Ronan's use of irony is constant, as can be seen in the dry reference to religion being less controversial than arithmetic. Later on, Coorg graduates to another school, this time run by Brothers. Their portrayal, nonetheless, is hardly more flattering than the previous:

It was either the Brother whose only subject was how grateful we should be to the Brothers for giving us an education at all, or the Brother who patrolled the rows with his dead smell, pinching and tweaking all the more attractive boys while dealing out pain to the less attractive via the end of a leather, or the Brother who leaped about like a monkey, both physically and verbally, his one motive being the heartfelt assertion that Hitler was a great and much misunderstood man. (217)

The reference to the stereotypical homosexual priest that likes to insinuate himself with little boys is not missing either, and it is a rather important one, for it is another reason for the increasing decline and discrediting of the Catholic Church in Ireland.



Another of Ronan's works that deals, among other subjects, with the matters of education, religion and priests and the connection between all these things is *The Better Angel* (1992). In this novel we can see how the protagonist John G. was raised in the midst of a deeply religious family, the effects it has had on him and how his relationship with religion came to change as he grew up. In the beginning, it is clear how religious ideas had been inculcated into him, as he explains to a girl what had happened to his brother, who had died at birth: 'The angels came and took him away to be with Baby Jesus in heaven' (32). When the girl mistakes his aunt for his mother, she laughs and

dismisses it by saying: 'the poor girl wasn't to know. A bishop could have made the same mistake' (29), as if a bishop stood for an icon of knowledge and wisdom.

The narrative centres not only on John G., but also around his relationship with his friend Smallgoods Temple, whom we first meet in English class confusing and antagonizing the teacher, Mr. Bates, described as a 'nervous individual, destined for priesthood and the missions, after several years of failing to deal with us' (9), for Temple was not confident about using Gaelic in class. This sort of rebellious behaviour would often get Smallgoods subjected to corporal punishment by the Christian Brothers. This subversive quality made John G. look at his friend as if he was larger than life, often wondering what was he doing in his presence, or at such a school. Sometimes, in his narrative, Smallgoods is referred to almost as some kind of divinity: 'I watched him for a while, and decided that he looked far from innocent himself. He had the face of someone who had met the devil. But then Christ must have had the face of someone who had met the evil. But neither Christ was an innocent' (36).

As asserted earlier, throughout the novel we are witnesses to John G.'s disappointment with the Christian faith, so that questioning Christ's innocence bears little resemblance with the way the boy spoke in the beginning of the story. John G. confesses his amazement however, upon the discovery that, despite his friend's complete disregard for any form of rules or the way he often quickly dismisses any feelings related to nationalism or religion, Smallgoods Temple also prays:

It must have been after he thought I was asleep that I heard him whisper in the dark. One prayer and then another. I wouldn't ever have thought that Smallgoods Temple prayed. I tried to imagine how he might be phrasing it; whether he was as arrogant with God as he was with the rest of us; did he speak to God as an inferior, or was he prepared to acknowledge that he might have one, private, equal? (60-61)

It is fascinating to remark on the usage of the word private here, and the deconstruction of God as a superior figure, by suggesting that perhaps every one of us is entitled to our own private divinity, to make use of in our own terms (this way of approaching God being also a Protestant common practise). Another interesting analysis relates to the names of the characters themselves. John G.'s friend is called Godfrey Smallgoods Temple, which manages to include the word God twice, as well as the word Temple, also connected to Christianity and religion, son of Godfrey Oliver David which

makes him the son of G.O.D., while his seven sisters have the nicknames of the seven deadly sins.

In addition, in *The Better Angel* we observe once more references to the subject of guilt and shame connected to one's own body and caused by the Catholic Church. This is particularly manifest in the passage that deals with the boys' trip to Italy. There, symptomatically far from Ireland, John G. discovers many pleasures, unknown to him so far, including that of eating and that which he calls 'self abuse' (72). It was only in Italy that he finally manages to work out 'the correct manipulatory procedure' (72). Interestingly, he says that he was expecting 'guilt' but all he got afterwards was 'a good night's sleep' (72). Taking John G.'s expectations into consideration, one may conclude that religious education inhibited him from experimenting when at home, and that only being far not simply from his home, but from his country, allowed him the psychic freedom to explore his physical being. 'Leaving Ireland for the first time was an act of courage' (70), the protagonist shares with us. It took the 'heat of the Italian night' (72) for him to indulge in certain pleasures for the first time, even stating that his two discoveries were somehow connected. From his words, we can assume that, had he been at home, guilt would have haunted him.

These emotions of fear, guilt and shame are effective tactics of control used by many religious faiths. Catholic Guilt is described in Wikipedia as 'particularly acute where there is an especially stark juxtaposition of widespread cultural acceptance and condemnation of a particular sin' ('Catholic Guilt'), which is exactly the case of the guilt the boy had expected to feel. That he does not is due to the change of environment, and also because as he grows up, the religious teachings that had been ministered to him start making less and less sense. Along with masturbation, Wikipedia features a list of other topics that may cause the same type of feelings in those who attempt to follow the norms of the Catholic Church, topics such as abortion, birth control, homosexuality, or adoption by homosexuals. Furthermore, the article also accounts for the way guilt is used for social control, given that 'since guilty people feel they are undeserving, they are less likely to assert their rights and prerogatives. Thus, those in power seek to cultivate a sense of guilt among the populace, in order to make them more tractable' ('Catholic Guilt'). The theme of religious shame is also dealt with, not in very different terms. It is characterized as a 'key (if controversial) theme in religion' ('Religious Shame'), for as religions make the case for a perfect being, or God, human beings are seen as impure, as are certain manifestations of their humanness, such as sexuality. Again, shame is



‘generally considered one pillar of socialization in all societies’, for it is ‘enshrined in legal precedent as a pillar of punishment and ostensible correction’ (‘Religious Shame’).

Given this, it is not difficult to understand how the implantation of these emotions resulted, intentionally or not, in a tool with which to control behaviour. However, it is the Church as an institution that operates such tools, not necessarily each and every individual that chooses the priesthood, for they often suffered the same kind of predicaments, the same type of feelings of guilt and shame for having experienced certain thoughts or desires that they were taught a priest should not have. This subject matter is especially pertinent for our discussion of Catholic Ireland, since, as seen before, the conduct of priests and several related scandals played a major role in the discrediting of the Church, and is also present in the *The Better Angel*. Halfway through the book, in ‘The Second Year’, Smallgoods stays for a while in the house of a priest with whom he has various discussions on the subject. He asks the priest:

So all sinful love is a perversion? All love that is unsanctified by the Church is a sickness of the soul? How can the love of an atheist be a sickness, and exactly the same love in a Catholic be ordained by God? How can adultery not be love, if it is felt and expressed in exactly the same way as love in a marriage? And can the love within a marriage be, as you claim, basically the same sort of love as the love of a child, or the love of God? Does a priest fancy his flock? (82)

Elsa, who worked for the priest as a housekeeper, and who was having an affair with Smallgoods, had been brought up to believe that ‘if you insulted a priest you would be turned to stone on the spot’ (82). Because father Damon Mulrahey, instead of being angry, kept smiling at the boy, she thought to herself that ‘the man must be a saint’ (82) for putting up with all of that. This is quite ironic, for what she does not know is that, in a matter of a few pages, our priest is going to make a pass at Smallgoods, and try to kiss him, just as the boy is starting to trust him. Smallgoods response is to bite the priest’s tongue, the organ with which he has been, supposedly, articulating the Truth.

After that, Smallgoods leaves the priest’s house, albeit not without going to Church for a final conversation. The father is at a loss for words, so Smallgoods does all the talking:

‘If you are saying what I think you are saying, don’t. I’m not sorry. That’s the trouble with your religion. You think you can do anything so long as you are sorry afterwards.’

Damon put his head in his hands, feeling the roughness and softness of his own hair and flesh, and forgot, for a perfectly happy moment, the existence of the bleeding

Christ, and His elusive Father. The only thought in his head was that he was close enough to Smallgoods Temple to touch him. (94)

Ronan does not paint an uncomplimentary or unbecoming portrait of the priest in all contexts. Nothing in the priest's actions gives away that he is nothing more than a patient, generous man. There is no attempt to show that there might be something wrong with the priest, as a person, which leaves the reader wondering whether wrongness might be somewhere else. Furthermore, it seems highly relevant to point out that the moment the priest forgot about the existence of Christ, it meant 'a perfectly happy moment'.

In the aforementioned last chapter of Tóibín's work *Love in a Dark Time*, he also considers the amount of scandals that Ireland has had in the news of priests who had sexually abused children, or who were homosexuals, and he even acknowledges having met some of them, from his time at a Catholic school. Although he admits that they have 'destroyed people's lives' (259) by abusing their responsibility, he confesses to having divided ideas on the subject, and it is very clear from his tone that he understands it partially through the fact that having to hide or trying to deny one's own sexuality is rather close to his heart:

I know how long the evenings must have been for them. I know how long they must have denied it, and when they gave in to it, how afraid they must have been. I know how much damage they caused. I imagine it was a lonely old business being gay in that seminary and perhaps worse afterwards in the outside world. (259)

Moreover, intensifying the ironies of this statement, is the thought-provoking suggestion that their homosexuality might have been what made them chose the path of priesthood to begin with. Some observers, such as Tirza True Latimer, have even referred to the Catholic Church as another kind of closet. It is certainly not hard to imagine that men might have chosen to join the Church to deny things that they realised they felt but regarded as improper, or simply as a way to avoid marriage or having to justify remaining unmarried. Tóibín considers yet another, less calculated, explanation: 'perhaps the idea that they had no interest in women made them think that they had a vocation. There was no one to tell them otherwise, these things were not discussed.' (259) He explains further:

It is probable that had they not been gay they would not have joined the seminary. When they joined the seminary no one talked about homosexuality. No one gave these

men any guidance about their sexuality; in the society around them it was a great taboo, and still is, as Mac Gréil's survey makes very clear. (259)

The survey Tóibín refers to is taken from Mac Gréil's *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited* (1996), in which he concludes that only 12.5 percent of the Irish people would welcome a gay person into their family, and only fifteen percent would welcome a gay person as a co-worker, whereas another fifteen percent would actually prefer to deport gay people from Ireland. The lack of guidance regarding homosexuality, or indeed sexuality, that Tóibín stresses underlines what I argued in the first chapter of this dissertation about the need for a history (as opposed to static gay canons) in order to help people realize that there are several ways to channel difference, rather than those involving hiding, denying, shame, and most of all, opting for something for the wrong reasons, causing damage to the lives of others as well, as has happened with the priesthood. Martin Taggart articulates such an experience in the short story collection *Coming Out*, that links homosexuality to priesthood:

I was gay and I was going to be a priest. I now have no doubt that my sexual orientation led me to the seminary, even though this may not have been as clear to me when I decided to go there, or didn't wish to acknowledge it. Celibacy was part of the package, which wasn't so bad as I wasn't going to be able to have a sexual relationship anyway – according to Church teaching – as I'm gay. I was also thinking that if I were a priest nobody would wonder why I'm not married or suspect me of being gay. ('Priesthood' – No Place to Hide', 223)

Ronan seems to be intrigued by this connection between priesthood and homosexuality for there is a short story in *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt* (1996) that deals with this theme via the use of humour and razor-sharp irony. 'Legacy' is the story of an extremely naïve priest called Virgil who, before travelling to Brazil, decides to obtain a bit more experience of the world and goes off in search of manifestations of sin and how to deal with them. Needless to say, he ends up with a lot more than he bargained for. The narrative is told from Virgil's point of view, but it is nonetheless highly satirical and it is constructed through double meanings, especially words from a religious context that carry different connotations and turn into witty puns when put into a gay framework. One of the most caustic and ironic moments happens right at the beginning when Virgil is considering what to do with his money: 'Half the money was earmarked for worthy charities (such as the sending of Bibles in Serbo-Croat to Bosnian

refugees, and in Somali to the famine victims), and the other half was to be used to establish himself as a missionary in the jungles of Brazil.' (93-94)

Despite his well-meaning plans, it is clearly inadequate that charity for him consists in providing Bibles for those who are hungry. These considerations aside, having decided to prepare himself for sin, by checking it out with his own eyes, Virgil sets out, on his quest:

He went into bars, but they were full of clean, good-looking young men who seemed to have nothing but goodwill to express to each other. Indeed, some of them were openly embracing in much the way that he and his friends embraced at church meetings. And some of them wore large silver crosses around their necks. Unused to drink, by eight o'clock Virgil was under the impression that he was among his own kind. (96)

The first thing to notice here is that he is unable to believe that clean, good-looking men are capable of sin, as if those who would engage in any action disapproved of by the Church had necessarily to look shabby and sullen. After trying out a few more clubs and meeting more people, 'Virgil said something about being part of a new community, but he was slurring, and the music was loud, and his remark went unnoticed' (97). The word 'community', for instance, has here the double meaning of a Church community, and the gay community. The connection between these two communities is made by scholars who admit an attraction to Catholicism by gay people, not only for the reasons mentioned earlier but also due to the fact that, according to Claude Summers: 'the Church's emphasis on spiritual mystery, mystical experience, elaborate ritual, and rich symbolism, as well as its beautiful architecture and transcendent art, has and continues to have a strong appeal to some glbtq people (the acronym stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people) ('Roman Catholicism'). Also, the Church provides people with the sense of belonging to a community, which can be very important for those who feel anxious or unwanted. What is more, the reference to 'the way he and his friends embraced at Church meetings' allows the reader to make the connection with a potential homoerotic attraction in these procedures. This attraction can even relate to the priests' androgynous garments. Patrick McCabe, compared to Frank Ronan by one of the critics cited in the back cover of *hOme*, in his *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), refers that his central character is the illegitimate son of the town priest whose 'starched garments' ended up being 'partially responsible for his son's attraction to the airy apparel of the opposite sex' (7-8).

The following passage is deeply linked to the asserted earlier correlation with the appeal of mystical experience, and unlimited love.

With some urgency, Warren asked him for thirty quid, and disappeared into one of the arches by the dance floor once it was in his hand. When he returned he handed Virgil what looked like an aspirin, and took one himself.

‘I was beginning to have a bit of a headache,’ Virgil said. ‘Thanks.’

He wondered about asking what the thirty quid had been for, but Warren had started to dance and it seemed a mean and churlish question. He tried to dance for a while without much success, and then he felt the music come at him, not through his ears but across the floor and up his legs. The next thing he knew he was holding on to Warren and feeling an incredible affection for all the world. Warren asked him if the White Dove had come up yet, and that was when he knew he was full of the spirit.

‘I love London,’ he said. ‘I never knew that all this was going on, under my nose. This is like, like real religion. In action, you know? God moves, God moves. God moves something, you know what I mean.’ (97-98)

*Handsome Men are slightly Sunburnt* features yet another story, ‘Ringsend’, relating homosexuality with religion, this time providing an explanation for the condemnation of same-sex relationships by the Catholic Church. The story tells the tale of a man who thinks he is the sole survivor in the world (or at least in Dublin), after some kind of unexplained apocalypse. He does not seem particularly affected by this newfound loneliness, and spends his time walking through the empty streets of Dublin and exercising. Eventually, he does come across a girl he used to know and they both find out that they both had cancer; they had been in the radiation machine for treatment at the time that the strange apocalypse erased every other living creature in the world.

After a while, the girl, Marion, held his hand and started to tell him that it must have been fate and that ‘like Adam and Eve ... It’s up to us to get the whole thing going again’ (86). Our narrator, at pains to try to tell her that he is gay, explains that she is taking a lot for granted and comments that ‘paradise ended when Adam and Eve started that sort of hanky-panky’ (86).

The biblical parallel takes, thus, a deliciously funny ironic twist, for in this paradise the survival of the species is doomed. By the end of the story Marion is gazing out of a window at an apple tree thinking that there will be fruit in the Autumn. Stanley, our protagonist, tells her: ‘You are out of luck there... There are no insects left to pollinate the flowers. Fruit is off the menu: forbidden or otherwise’ (89). The phrase ‘there are no insects left to pollinate the flowers’ is very clear as to one of the reasons the Church

regards homosexual relationships as unnatural and dangerous, that is, in terms of the preservation of the species.

Finally, in this context, I would like to consider *Dixie Chicken* (1994). In this book, the narrator is none other than God himself, which allows Ronan to tell the story while constantly referencing matters related to the Christian Faith or the relation of a deity to human beings. It is evident that Ronan has used religious imagery and beliefs in the service of their own undermining. Thus, God tells us the story of someone (Rory Dixon) who caught his eye from the beginning:

I watched Rory Dixon from the beginning until he was killed. The time I have devoted to him might perhaps have been better used elsewhere, but in recent times I have been observing events rather than interfering with them. And as for time, when I made that, I made plenty of it. Perhaps I should introduce myself. It's a sad reflection of the times we live in that I should need to do so. Most of you will know of me as God, and that identification will have to do for the moment. There are a couple of rumours concerning my person that I should contradict at once. I am not dead and I am not Eric Clapton. I have been silent for a long time. Perhaps I have been sulking, because whenever I have tried to get anything across to you in the past my words have been so badly misinterpreted. In retrospect, those prophets were a lot of airheads, more concerned with the flaming chariot than the job of work I gave them, and I got so disillusioned with the lot of you that I thought I might never speak again. Only the death of Rory Dixon could have brought me out of retirement.

It was the fact that he was born in a cowshed which first drew my attention. There was an echo from the birth of another great charmer in whom I was an interested party. (3)

Many of Ronan's reflections on religion rely on biblical parallels, such as this one, the birth of Rory Dixon taking place in a cowshed, for his parents had decided to move away from the city.

They had been living in Dublin, dreaming of a better life, away from materialism and Catholicism and meat-eating and the hollow, inebriated pessimism which passed for intellectual life in that city, until Sheila became pregnant, when they decided that their child should be born in a better place. They bought a cowshed halfway up a mountain on a rough acre and began their wholesome existence, with their kiln and their spinning wheel, and their ideals intact. (4)

A great deal of the first part of the book deals with Rory's education, for it obeyed none of the moral standards of Ireland at the time, relying on the philosophy that the 'only morality was pleasure' (5). His parents regarded him as 'their experiment for a new world order' (5) and had 'set out to prove that a childhood without prejudice or violence or hate would produce a well-balanced, fulfilled adult' (5).

By the time Rory gets to his adolescence, ‘most of his contemporaries had begun their working lives, except those who had declared a religious vocation’ (8). As we had the opportunity to have observed before, Ronan would not let this subject pass without further consideration, so he has God reflecting on the Calling and on fear:

The lives of those ones were finished. I find it a bit hard that they claimed to have been called by God when I did no such thing, nor would I call such miserable specimens as those. They were called by their own fear. Some were afraid of earning a living and some were afraid of eternal damnation, but not one of them heard the voice of God. I should know. (8)

Halfway through the story, God explodes in a dramatic and lengthy outburst where he examines many of the myths that compose the Christian faith. Sharp criticism is directed at those who claim all too simply that God is Love, while forgetting what atrocities have been undertaken in the name of that love:

And wishful-thinking Christians will tell you that God is love, as if the disease of love had overtaken me, as if I were a heart-shaped satin-cushioned box of chocolates, as if it could be forgotten that I was called the Scourge of Nations, as if LOVE were not written over the Inquisition as FREEDOM was written over the camps, as if the simplicity which can be found in nothing else can be invested on me. Heaven has been made so celluloid, so unbelievable, that all it needs now is a double-page spread in *Hello!* magazine.

And if not love, then what? There was a time when I thought I knew and it seemed like there was a master plan. (145)

In the same emotional outburst God points out an interesting similarity between the Irish and the Jews, in view of three great obsessions they are said to have in common: sex, literature and a monopoly on God. The latter is particularly pertinent, as it criticizes Ireland for enforcing heavy controls on the way religion ought to be experienced.

On a different note, Ronan also contemplates the concept of God as merciful and forgiving, along with the notions of goodness and compassion advocated by the Church, and leaves it clear that whenever something goes wrong, blaming God is all too easy but incorrect. In Ronan’s narration, God turns the tables on us and holds us accountable for our own mistakes:

Death and suffering are not tragedies in my eyes. The camps were human: they were your responsibility, not mine. They were within the scope of your interference, not of mine. I might be able to notice every sparrow that falls from the sky, but I’m not necessarily in the business of giving each one a coronary by-pass, and I’m not overcome

with sorrow at the sight of it. If I had to mourn every tragedy in the world there wouldn't be time for anything else. Who on earth, I'd like to know, started the rumour that God's compassionate? It is one of those lunatic ideas which grew with Christianity, because a lot of those attracted to Christianity were people with more compassion than sense. Those asinine, self-centred martyrs. How do they think I felt? Have you ever watched someone being torn limb from limb and at the same time declaring that they're suffering for you. I thought I had made it very clear that I wanted no blood sacrifice. How could I possibly afford the luxury of compassion? It was not my intention to raise this subject at all, and now that I have I should not have spoken of the camps in the past tense. These things are not in the past. I can see camps at this moment. Not on the same scale, but camps none the less. These things are part of your condition. (147)

This stress on making the reader reflect on responsibility and accountability is expressed unmistakably in the last sentence of the book, where God laments that he has lost Rory Dixon: 'I am only God and I didn't make the rules' (218).



The aim of this chapter has been to make the case, via Ronan's novels and short stories, for the existence of a different sensibility in gay Irish discourse through its inseparable connection to considerations of, broadly visible throughout all of his fiction. Of the Ireland in which he grew up, as well as the Ireland of Ronan's characters, Inglis observes that 'being Irish and being Catholic became synonymous' (17), and that 'it was part of what people considered themselves to be' (91). Naturally, the impact of this way of thinking and behaving has left its mark on literature, even though the moral scenery is now gradually or even rapidly changing. 'What makes Irish gay experience different from other gay experiences?', asks Brian Finnegan in *Quare Fellas* (6), only to provide the answer himself, once again pointing the finger at the Catholic Church of Ireland and the fear it instigates:

Until 23 June 1993 gay sex between consenting adults was illegal in Ireland. This, along with the Catholic line which says it is OK to be gay as long as you don't have gay sex, drove urban Irish gay men and lesbians underground and left those in rural communities with no room for difference and self-expression. The legacy of self-loathing and hatred which this systematic oppression has left with the Irish people has been very difficult to overcome, but its roots lie in another form of systematic persecution that lasted over eight hundred years. The Irish were once seen as the most trusting and innocent people in the world, but our history has made us very frightened. In our fear, the Irish turned to God for guidance, and put their trust in the Catholic Church. It is only because the Church has been so integrated in the development of Irish identity



that the laws on homosexuality were not repealed until 1993. Ireland has always struggled to belong to the prosperous West, yet we have lagged behind in the revision of laws concerning morality, laws that will align us with our peers. Fear has been the key to our belated changes – fear of change and fear of disobedience. (6)

When asked to what extent was religion important or crucial in his work, and whether it would be possible to write Irish gay fiction without the weight of Catholic ideas and imagery, Frank Ronan replied that it was possible ‘and even desirable’ (Email to author). But he admits that ‘dealing with religion, or organized superstition as it might be more accurately called, has been crucial so far, and probably will be for a time to come. It would be nice to think of a world without it though – perhaps I should consider science fiction though thinking of Ursula le Guin’s *Paradises Lost*, I’m not sure you can escape it, even in space’ (Email to author, August, 2006).



# 3

## **Family Ties: The Irish Family Cell**

This chapter focuses on the analysis of family in Ronan's work, aiming to investigate family relationships, the way they are constructed and their significance in terms not only of the creation of individual identity, but also of the structuring of the identity of a country. The institution of the family is generally regarded as indispensable to society providing married partners and their children with stability and commitment. Although a notion known to most people, and apparently unproblematic, the family is a challenging and polemical concept precisely given its seemingly innate and biological nature. Most of the attacks on such a conception in western societies have historically been undertaken by left-wing thinkers.

One of the most influential texts that deals with the subject is Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848), in which the idea of family is not seen as a natural result of biological evolution, but as a product of industrialization, in the sense that the family unit is protected and presented in the most positive light possible by the capitalist state, in our day and age with the help of the media and religious institutions, for an heterosexual family with children buys big and in bulk (large houses, cars, money spent on weddings, babies), functioning as the basic unit of consumption. Moreover, Marx accused capitalist society of ranking jobs and occupations according to their wages, which leaves housewives and their unpaid labour at the bottom of the scale. In *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels considers the notion that men go out to work while women stay at home providing unpaid housework for the men, while remaining economically dependent as anything but biologically based. He argues that in ancient societies, relying on farming for instance, men and women's work was distinct, but subject to equal prestige. Only after the industrialization

process took place, according to Engels, did the differentiation of work occur, separating the private and public sphere, leaving women to work at home, and freeing men to earn their wages in the factories. Furthermore, Marx and Engels also pointed the finger at the institution of family for being responsible for the perpetuation of these values from one generation to another.

This leftist view has been adopted by the feminist movement since the sixties, with slight adjustments, for besides recognizing the oppressiveness of the family structure, it was felt that Marx and Engels failed to recognize the way man and women experience family differently, making distinctions only between capitalists and proletarians and leaving gender out of their class analysis.

In 1979, at the Eleventh World Congress of the Fourth International, a resolution was passed entitled 'Origin and Nature of Women's Oppression' which dealt with the institution of family as experienced by women. Drawing on Marxist examples of early subsistence societies, where 'social production was organized communally and its product shared equally, and in which men and women played different roles in the productive process' (Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression), though enjoying the same status quo, the oppression of women is therefore not viewed as biological, but rather 'its origins are economic and social in character' (Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression), thus attributing its source to the transition into a class society. Fundamental to this oppression was, therefore, the family system. The resolution noted that the very word family is worth investigating, for it comes from the Latin word *familia*, which meant the aggregate of household servants, deriving from the term *famulus*, meaning servant. Furthermore, still drawing on Marxist theories, the family form was also held responsible for the reproducing 'within itself the hierarchical, authoritarian relationships necessary to the maintenance of class divisions' (Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression), fostering possessive and aggressive attitudes, for the maintenance of this system is regarded as a basic policy of every capitalist state, 'dictated by the social and economic needs of capitalism itself' (Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression). But the resolution accuses the family of maintaining more than class distinctions:

It moulds the behaviour and character structure of children from infancy to adolescence. It trains, disciplines and polices them, teaching submission to established authority. It then curbs rebellious, non-conformist impulses. It represses and distorts all sexuality, forcing it into socially accepted channels of male and female sexual activity for reproductive purposes and socio-economic roles. It inoculates all the social values

and behavioural norms that individuals must acquire in order to survive in class society and submit to its domination. It distorts all human relationships by imposing on them the framework of economic dependence, and sexual repression. (Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression)

Another thing that this family system is criticized for sustaining is the very idea of family 'as the most natural and imperishable of human relations' (Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression), indoctrinating this notion from infancy. This text dating from 1979, proves to be somewhat outdated, especially in its insistence on regarding the woman as economically dependent on her male partner, although already taking into consideration and predicting the entry of women into the work force on a larger scale and the gradual disappearance of the nuclear family.

In 2003, the Fourth International approved another resolution connected to the subject, only this time taking into account the gay and lesbian point of view. The same lines of thought are apparent in the text, although the focus lies particularly on the family system in its role as promoting monogamous, heterosexual relationships. In this way, 'the state and medical and psychiatric establishments are structured so as to promote stable, procreative heterosexuality' (Gay/Lesbian Liberation), thus creating a clear difference between 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexuality, one favoured, the latter discouraged or, preferably, suppressed. One context for this normative fear can be seen in Ronan's short story 'Ringsend' in which the main character, Stanley, will be potentially guilty for the elimination of humankind on account of being a homosexual and refusing to consider procreation. His metaphor of the lack of insects to pollinate flowers, thus making the growth of any fruit impossible, reflects his concerns at not adjusting to the norms and in relation to what is expected of him.

The resolution on Gay/Lesbian Liberation also exposes capitalist society for sponsoring the image of the family as a combination of heterosexual love and parental love, which 'is supposed to bind adults to their biological children in a connection combining affection, responsibility and authority'. This stress on the family causes society to be organized in a way 'which assumes that many basic needs will be met within the family' (Gay/Lesbian Liberation), leaving those who are marginalized from it, whether or not by choice, to have difficulty meeting those same needs. This family form is hence presented as oppressive to anyone who deviates from the norm and excludes most homosexual people from family life. This resolution claims that 'same-sex eroticism can only be lived out episodically, in the margins of their family lives'

(Gay/Lesbian Liberation). Furthermore, this imposed heterosexualism makes lives problematic for many people who fail to conform to the norms or ideals of masculine and feminine gender roles:

Thousands of transgendered people unable or unwilling to fit into socially recognizable families, unable or unwilling to live as 'proper men' or 'proper women', are banished to the furthest reaches of the labour market and of society, often supporting themselves in the sex trade or other stigmatized occupations, faced with general contempt or even violent attacks. (Gay/Lesbian Liberation)

Education is once again focused on in this 2003 resolution, for it argues that at home and at school children are constantly pressured to conform to conventional gender roles, and that normalizing prejudice and fear of transgression are a huge part of that lesson.

Wendy McElroy's *Sexual Correctness: The Gender-Feminist Attack on Women* (1996) identifies different approaches to feminism, as well as alternative conceptions of marriage and family, along with potential solutions for minimizing the oppression of the family system. The distinctions in question are: individualist feminism, liberal feminism and gender feminism, which, as it is evident from the title, is subject to heavy criticism throughout the book. Liberal feminism is characterized by its perspective on marriage as salvageable. This approach began in the 1960s with Betty Friedan's crucial work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in which marriage was seen as a prison, but also as an institution in need of reform, as opposed to elimination. Along these lines, the family requires enrichment rather than abolition. On the other hand, gender feminism takes a more radical approach, closely following Marxist analysis, and defending the elimination of the family and demanding intervention from the state to undertake such a task. Marriage is viewed as an involuntary state and as legalized prostitution. Within this line of thought, feminists like Shulamith Firestone, Ti Atkinson, Ellen Peck, Kate Millett and Kathrin Peruz are included. Individualist feminist, where the author includes herself, is radically opposed to this last approach, in the sense that its proposal is the eradication of state intervention altogether. Marriage and any family form would therefore become subjective, and in accordance with each person's preference. Instead of agreeing with the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' the idea here is that the personal remains personal, and thus marriage and divorce should fall beyond the state's legislation.

In the Irish context, one of the most important works on the subject is Kathryn Conrad's *Locked in the Family Cell* (2004). Use of the word 'cell' is explained by drawing in what the prison cell, the biological cell, the revolutionary cell and the monastic cell have in common: a sense of closure and containment. She argues that the centrality of the family cell to the social, economic and political organization limits the private and the public sphere, as well as the nation itself. Furthermore, it defines and circumscribes accepted sexuality. The discussion of the concept and influence of the family cell throughout the book does not differ much from the anti-capitalist and feminist theories presented before, but this work takes into consideration aspects that are specific to Ireland, such as the impact of the Catholic Church and the fact that Ireland is a post-colonial country.

The dual forces of Christianity, which reinforce the patriarchal system of family relationships, and British colonialism, which divided the land and penalised social formations that did not further British interests, helped to fix the heterosexual nuclear family as the primary unit group of Irish society. (5)

She asserts that the family cell is a prerequisite for Catholic and Protestant alike, a matter of social as well as economic survival, due to the fact that capital has become the core of the economic universe. Furthermore, this cell is seen as self-regulating, a 'means of control and reproduction, both literally and figuratively, of the social order' (10). Self-regulating is used here in the sense that, particularly in the past, the family kept to itself, and dealt with social transgression within itself, for such transgressions had to be hidden from 'the eyes of those who might punish them, whether the local community, the church, or the colonial authority' (9).

Conrad draws on Foucault to show that the rise in importance of the psychological discourse helped the family cell to become even further a method of social control, similar and connected to the kind of control analysed in the previous chapter, undertaken by the Catholic Church in standardizing and restricting sexuality and gender. She describes how inappropriate female behaviour was being explained through hysteria and how the medical discourse assisted in branding as perversion anything which did not fit within the heterosexual family model. Homosexuality and same-sex unions were dangerous, for they were a direct challenge to the inevitability of the family cell as natural and fundamental in society. This family structure is, therefore, 'one that excludes,

silences and injures a large portion of the population and strictly limits the public behaviour of all' (10).

This scheme of events has been rapidly changing in Ireland. While homosexuality has been decriminalized, the family cell still possesses a weight that works to slow change down. In Jack Fritscher's short-story 'Chasing Danny Boy', the protagonist, Dermid reflects on how things work in his motherland, Ireland, the land 'where the love that dare not speak its name first learned to hiss' (86). He compares taboos in his country and how they have been changing. His sister Bridget was a single mother and 'one time, that taboo would have been the end of a girl's name and the shame of a family, but in the vertiginous new times, pregnancy was a style and paid for and given little knit booties and pennies enough for a ride in the stroller to MacDonald's' (91). He also ponders on another taboo, closer to his heart, that of homosexuality, 'and that too was a style, and legal' (91). Nevertheless, a few pages later, he reflects on how life in Dublin had sped up too fast for him and how 'he could not go back down to Bray and live like Bridget with her kid in their parents' house' (95). In this story, it is clear how homosexuality is now legal in the eyes of the state, but the same does not necessarily happen within the structure of the family cell.

Another example comes in the form of another Irish short-story, 'Raindancing', by Anthony McGrath, included in *Quare Fellas (New Irish Gay Writing)*, edited by Brian Finnegan (1994). This story explores the author's relationship with his mother, a relationship that was perfect and glorious until the subject of homosexuality came into the picture. At college, the author fell in love with another man, and a relationship began. The phrase 'we delighted in finding alcoves in lonely restaurants where we could be all we knew we were' (117), illustrates, like Fritscher's story, that legal does not mean accepted. 'With Gordon, I could accept all that we were, and could see no wrong with it – no harm, no hurt, no humiliation, that a media had thought me to feel' (117). But in the middle of all that bliss, there came a moment where he had to confront his mother with the truth about himself and he knew that that was not going to be an easy task.

She believed in family units, she believed in a church and she believed in all that the generations gone before had held good. The moral dilemmas of today's society never played on her mind. 'Open minds let in the wrong sort of stuff' was her cast-in-stone motto. (117)



After the disclosure, his mother stopped talking to him, and he left home not sure how to make amends. He felt that she somehow blamed herself for his homosexuality, but he could not conceive what there was to blame herself for. She ended up dying of cancer before he could find the courage to visit her, out of fear of rejection, and thus the very notion of family as something strict and unchangeable was what ultimately brought this particular family to an end.



Throughout the entire body of Frank Ronan's fiction there are many references to the pressure caused by the institution of family in Ireland, some of which are very much connected with some of the viewpoints presented above. The one that stands out most clearly regards what Kathryn Conrad described as the self preservation instinct of Irish families, characterized by the attempt to hide any kind of indiscretion or dissent within itself, out of fear of the reaction by the community around it, or disapproval by the Church. This is particularly evident in the way that Ronan's families deal with unwanted children, or in most cases, grandchildren and I shall analyse two plain examples.

The first is from 'Salthill', a short-story published in *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt*. Ron and Josy live in a flat together, and they are both waiting for the birth of their baby, so that they can give it up for adoption. Ron is not too happy with this arrangement but he has not been given a choice, as it has been mostly Josy's parents' decision:

If it had not been for the conception they might well have been engaged to be married by now, in spite of Ron's anarchic leanings. But, as it was, the expected arrival of the child seemed to have set a date for their sundering. She had arranged for an adoption, and arranged it so that there would be no room for Ron in her subsequent life. It was her decision and that of her parents. The chain of events was out of his control and he was only a shadow in the spectacle. (3)

It is noteworthy how Ronan conveys that they could have been married, if it was not for the baby, opposing popular belief that a baby is what most couples wanting to get married crave for. Somehow, a baby before it was socially expected to come along impeded their relationship from developing any further. All that Josy and her parents seem to desire is distance from that situation and, consequently, Ron.

Her parents, once they had stopped screaming, helped her to think the whole thing out rationally. Of course, abortion was never considered. A shotgun wedding was out of the question because they considered themselves to be the sort of family to whom that kind of thing did not happen. And they had never approved of Ron in the first place. The plan was that Josy was to go away quietly and not come home until she had had the child adopted, and then she could pick up her life again and no more would be said. (4)

Another significant aspect that is deeply connected to the discussion of family is the easy assumption by this young couple that, in order to live their lives, in the manner they saw fit, they would have to lead double lives. This is not questioned, it is something that had to be done in order to please her parents and it seemed natural. In this way, sincerity, which would seem fundamental in a family relationship, is easily put aside, supposedly for everyone's benefit:

Their conduct had been guided by instinct. In their backgrounds there had been no rules or precedents for their lifestyle. Their parents had been the sort of people who had resorted to the rosary to ward off the temptations of sex during courtship. So Ron and Josy had led a double life, going to Mass when they were at home in the country, and smoking dope and sleeping together when they were in the city. None of this seemed unnatural to them. It was a way of life for our whole generation. (3)

The last sentences of this passage seem to imply that this scheme of things is unnatural and that the author himself has suffered due to this accepted pattern, in which to be a worthy family member, one has to follow pre-conceived rules that do not allow one to be honest, especially around the people who ought to be closest.

Another book that offers considerations on family reactions to unwanted children, and their efforts to conceal such situations from the local community, takes place not in Ireland, but in England. However, *The Men who loved Evelyn Cotton* being deals with preoccupations that are closely related to those of Ronan's books set in Ireland.

At the beginning of the book, the main character, Evelyn, gets pregnant during her college years and the father of the child leaves her on her own and sets off on a trip to France. The time of this early part of the narrative is set in the 1960s, so Evelyn did not have much choice and she and her son became inmates of an institute for 'naughty girls' (10). Her idea was to give the child up for adoption, but she came to a different alternative: marriage. Her first marriage is a complete flop and is undoubtedly presented as simple exchange of favours, completely devoid of any kind of emotion, let alone romantic interest. She is glad that she is able to keep her son, that she does not have to

work as a secretary or face being a spinster and she gets her wish of having someone else taking care of her expenses and putting food on the table. She is not very sure as to how the arrangement benefits her husband until she understands that all he feeds on is her gratitude and acceptance. Although most of her relationships all through the book fail miserably and involve an amazingly small amount of actual love, this one is bluntly presented as a straightforward trade, but one in which the man has the upper hand, and can demand gratitude just for 'saving' a single mother from a bad name, or from becoming a spinster. When she realizes the truth about her end of the bargain, she comes to the decision of leaving him, and going to see her parents. It is in this passage that we see a very vivid picture of her relationship with her parents, as a single mother:

Considering how deeply ashamed they were to see her, Evelyn's parents made a commendably brave show of her visit. Her mother was constantly trying to think of nice things to say about the baby, and her father was kind enough to say nothing at all. Benedict was a large, healthy baby, all fat and smiles. There was no pretending that he might be new born and, even if he was, the whole village had seen her as a single girl eight months before.

They didn't specifically say that Evelyn wasn't to take her baby out for walks, but they somehow made it a lot easier if Evelyn went for walks on her own. People who had been due to visit them were put off. They had to cancel a dinner party. But they tried to bear it all cheerfully, and not ask Evelyn too often when she was going back to Oxford. (15)

The words 'brave show' and 'kind enough to say nothing' are very expressive in describing that for those parents being nice or supportive was not completely impossible but required a great effort. Also, the way that they tried to withdraw from the people around them is easy to read and indicative of the previously mentioned tendency of families to believe their self preservation depends on keeping to themselves. Despite her parents' desperate endeavour to keep up appearances and to be 'nice' to her, her perception of what is really going on is so acute that she starts having dreams in which her parents kill her baby:

The pressure of being with her parents was almost bearable because of the novelty of it. But, on the other hand, she was trying their bravery to the limit. They went about with white knuckles whispering to each other.

Evelyn began to dream that Benedict had been killed. Her parents wouldn't tell her what they had done with the body, but kept reassuring her that it was all for the best. These dreams seemed disturbingly likely to her, and she began to look about her for the next frying pan within leaping distance. (15-16)



The analysis of the family cell in terms of the differing roles of the father and mother also needs to be undertaken. The figure of the father in Irish writing can also be considered as one of the specificities of Irish discourse, due to the stereotype of the broken, drunken Irish father. Ranging from James Joyce to contemporary authors like Patrick McCabe (*The Butcher Boy*'s main character is the son of an alcoholic man and a depressed, suicidal mother) or Frank McCourt (in his memoir *Angela's Ashes*, he tells the story of his childhood, featuring a drunken father who goes about drinking his own wages and the money that the family was supposed to support his children with), many writers have depicted the consequences of the experience of dealing with an alcoholic parent. I include this paternal figure in the discussion of Irish literary specificities because of the high rate of alcoholism in Ireland, but especially because of the apparent reasons for this state of affairs.

Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995), blames this situation on British colonialism. According to him, the fact that fathers ended up settling for their condition as colonized people led the generation gap between fathers and their naturally rebellious sons to become aggravated. Moreover, the father's own feeling of frustration and impotence towards these circumstances was in itself a cause for this high rate of alcoholism.

In societies on the brink of revolution, the relation between fathers and sons is reversed. The Irish "risorgimennto" was, among other things, a revolt by angry sons against discredited fathers. The fathers had lost face, either because they had compromised with the occupying English in return for safe positions as policemen or petty clerks, or because they had retreated into a demeaning cycle of alcoholism and unemployment. The Irish father was often a defeated man, whose wife frequently won the bread and usurped his domestic power, while the priest usurped his spiritual authority. Most fathers accepted the English occupiers as part of the 'given' and warned their sons against revolt. (380)

Another reason he highlights for this state of affairs is that immigration had 'robbed the community of potential innovators' (383). From this, Kiberd concludes that this broken father could in no way project a convincing image of authority, and that these men give their children an impression of being permanently undecided, evasive and that the best attitude to take is to avoid taking sides in any radical fashion in this way. In the

Irish case, the patriarchal family takes on a particular weight, for it can be argued that the Irish male sought 'all the more control within his own family, if only because of his political and social impotence outside it' (390), although Kiberd also admits that evidence in Irish writing confirms that the autocratic father is often a weak figure, 'concealing that weakness under the protective coverage of the prevailing system' (390).

Kiberd uses Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to illustrate the repudiation of one's own father and conveys that 'at the core of Joyce's art is the belief that fathers and sons are brought together more by genetic accident than by mutual understanding, and that most sons are compelled to rebel' (382). Kiberd quotes from *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* frequently, showing how the theme of absent or unreliable fathers, as well as other figures of authority is constant throughout Joyce's work, although he leaves out what I consider to be the perfect condensation of these notions, the short story, 'Counterparts' (1914). This story, like most of the others in *Dubliners*, deals with frustration and repetition, but it takes on a much more violent aspect than the others, for while the other characters tend ultimately to accept the cyclic routine and paralysis in their lives, Farrington, the main character, explodes in bursts of uncontrolled rage, that instead of making him feel better, keep worsening the way he feels about himself. He gets fed up with his mind-numbing work, cannot think of anything else but getting to the pub, and fails to attract the attention of a woman he sees sitting in one of the pubs. Although he does not have much money, the unwritten laws of Dublin's pub comradeship make him spend a lot more than he intended on rounds, and his friends keep dragging him from place to place. His anger escalates through the story, as well as his sense of frustration, which reaches its highest point when he loses an arm wrestle to someone who is just a boy, but it is detonated only when he gets home and beats up his own son. This story is highly illustrative, for it shows how monotony and frustration, allied to heavy drinking, can mount up to violence and an inadequate family environment. Frustration and disappointment are boosted by alcohol, but at the same time they are also its cause. What I consider the most interesting, however, is the way drinking more, spending more and having to pay rounds for his friends aggravates his anger, and yet he seems unable to put a stop to something that is already a kind of ritual.

In *Moral Monopoly*, Tom Inglis describes pubs in Ireland as male sanctuaries, where men could seek refuge. Women were only allowed inside the pubs in the 1970s. He conveys that women, through 'their alliance with the priests took control of the home' and men (including bachelors) took to 'congregating in pubs' (170). In his chapter

‘The Bachelor Drinking Group’, the ritual of drinking in Ireland is analysed, in a manner which could explain how Farrington gets dragged into something that gives him pleasure and causes him anger simultaneously. He refers to this as a ‘highly complicated but unwritten code of regulations’ (171) by which men need to act accordingly in order to gain prestige. There are turns to buy rounds, and one is antagonized or ignored if one fails to comply, or buys one out of turn, or needs to go home early. There is also an implicit obligation to take a drink if one is offered to you. What is interesting about the groups that are formed in these circumstances is that the status within these groups is independent of class or wealth. The prestige system is, for example, built around the ability to hold one’s liquor. Much like what happens to Farrington in the story, Inglis notes that ‘drinking in the pubs becomes not so much a festive event as a ritualistic, almost dutiful activity’ (171).

Kerrygold’s website features various lessons in Irish culture and even teaches rules as to how to behave in an Irish bar:

You can order your beer by the pint or the glass, the former being twice as large as the latter. Gentlemen are rarely seen downing a glass.

The best way to tip your server or bartender is to buy them a drink along with your order. And, of course, always buy them a pint.

If you’re asked to sit at a table, be prepared for quick wit and wicked jibes. You’ll make friends quicker if you can deliver a timely comeback as well as you can take a good-hearted cut down.

Rounds are always bought in turns, and when it’s your turn you have to step up to the plate. If you’re done drinking, tough. Leave after you’ve bought the round.

If you know you’re a lightweight, consider sitting close to a potted plant. After a few rounds no one will notice you watering the thing with your pint glass. (You’re Among Friends)

In Frank Ronan’s work the theme of the drinking father is also explored, though unsurprisingly with a few twists. *A Picnic in Eden* (1991) is the story of a man struggling with his emotions or lack of them, who keeps changing his mind about if he wants to narrate from a third person perspective or if he can handle first person narration. Drinking is present from the first page, which also describes a sexual act, that turns out to be the moment of the conception of another main character, and in which the father, or soon-to-be father, was completely drunk.

The protagonist, Adam Parnell, introduces his father’s drinking problem early in the story, before his father was aware of it. Throughout the rest of the book his despise and contempt for his father, for this situation, and for the lonely childhood he put him

through is plain and obvious. As soon as he grows up, he moves to England, to lead a peaceful life away from Ireland and his family, managing his own gardening nursery and settling into comfortable, though not particularly loving, marriage. Later in the book, during one of his holidays in Scotland, he gets called back to Dublin by his brother to become involved in the treatment his father is getting at a clinic, through the form of confrontation therapy. He is stunned at having to do such a thing, and he confides to his best friend Dougie that he hardly knows anything about his father and has no desire to and that the presence of his father makes his stomach churn with acid. He explains to his friend that he has not got anything to say to or confront his father with because he had already undertaken the inner Oedipal process of killing off his father:

I don't know whether this is profound or not, but it struck me with a great blow. Does that make it profound? I was wondering, as I came up the hill to you, what I could possibly have to say to that man. I told my brother that I had nothing to say to him, and he told me to say just that. I can't see it doing any good. I have killed the man off in my head. How do you confront a corpse? (108)

Dougie enquires as to what exactly had caused all that hate and Adam clarifies that his father is an alcoholic. Dougie not only does not sound surprised, but seems to approve of it. 'Sound man', he says, 'I wish I was' (109).

When Adam finally goes to meet his father, they talk about trivial things and when the conversation becomes slightly more personal (his father asks him how his wife is doing and he confides that she seems to want to have children) this comes a complete shock to him, for 'he couldn't deal with the idea that he could have a real conversation with his father. Something that he vowed never to attempt, for the sake of his own sanity' (117). He explains the reason for this in a flashback of a conversation his father had with his brother Thomas when Thomas was seventeen. His father had asked his brother, in a confidential, friendly way if he had ever slept with girls.

Thomas fell for it and said that he had. And then his father threw off the cloak of friendliness and began to scream at him. It wasn't to do with morality. Morality was the excuse. It was to do with Christian Parnell proving to himself that no one was up to his standards. That even his own sons betrayed his image of himself. (117)

Astounded by falling into what he considers another of these traps, he abruptly changes tone and asks his father if he had ever thought of committing suicide, to which

he replies: 'often'. Later, at the actual confrontation, when asked to participate, he reflects on the reasons for alcoholism:

What if a person is an alcoholic because he is inadequate in the first place? You have spoken of the physiological and subsequent psychological effects of alcohol, and the shambling wrecks that alcohol produces. As though alcohol was the beginning of the problem. But what if the person was a shambling wreck in the first place, and became alcoholic for that reason? What if, but curing someone of the drink, you are only removing the chief symptom of their real condition? (128)

This outburst is connected to Kiberd's and Inglis' aforementioned opinions on the Irish broken father, that alcohol is a symptom rather than a cause. In the last chapter of his book, Inglis suggests that it is the way in which the Irish drink, that makes this peculiar to Ireland:

The surrender of self in religious and family life was mirrored in the pub. What made male community life in Ireland different was not so much that they drank more, but they way they drank. Hard drinking is about elimination of the self. (244)

Another interesting aspect is that Adam's loathing for his father has nothing to do with physical violence, but with psychological damage. Adam conveys that this provides a more subtle disruption, in the sense that he had gone through a whole childhood 'of depending on someone who didn't exist, who is completely unreliable and too selfish to be capable of love' (129). He stresses the difficulty of 'being asked to be loyal to someone who had no loyalty to you, and being too young to understand what is going on' (129).

The ironic twist of this story comes later on in the book, in another father-son conversation in which the father attempts to take some responsibility and gives an astounding explanation for his role in his son's early life:

It wasn't to do with being spoiled. It was more to do with life being too easy for me. In a way I was determined that that should never happen to any of you. In a way I drank because I thought that you would all be better people if you had a hard childhood. And you are. (174)

Adam soon states that he is not buying any of that, but it is very interesting the way that, whether he believes or not, Christian is implying that a hard childhood, and a drunken father make someone a better person. In this conversation, Adam goes back to the suicide conversation, this time asking his father about the best method. Christian tells



him that he would throw himself off a ferry, and Adam, euphorically, advises him to do it, by explaining to him the kind of life that awaits an old alcoholic. When he utters these words, he is convinced that his father is not the suicidal type, and even feels better about him, given that he was done with having killed him in his own head. This idea of the symbolic patricide is highly recurrent in the book. In addition, there is also a point in the book in which Adam dreams of being raped by his father, and considers that your father making love to you is 'much odder than not loving you at all' (132). This is the only tinge of violence throughout the narrative, and it is only imagined, a symbolic rape, along with the imagined patricide. Or so Adam thinks, for in the final pages, Adam's father does commit suicide. He jumps off a ferry.

His father is not the only one to be linked to drinking in the story. When Adam gets to Dublin with his brother, Thomas arrives at the airport and heads straight for the bar. He asks for two pints of Guinness, even though Adam reiterates that he is not having more than water. The way Adam associates this behaviour with being back in Ireland is noteworthy, stressing the way it feels like a ritual: 'Thomas drank both pints in the end. All this was normal, a ritual. Adam was irritated by being home within ten minutes of arriving. He couldn't see why it had to be like this. Why his own brother had to play the Paddy to him' (113). This expression 'playing the Paddy' touches a nerve, especially upon his realization on the next page that 'Thomas was probably only playing the Paddy in response to him playing the worldly sophisticated' (114).

But Frank Ronan does not limit himself to including these specificities of Irish discourse into his fiction. He also challenges and deconstructs them. One of the ways in which this defiance of stereotypes seems most apparent has to do with the popular notion that the Irish father is incapable of showing affection for his children. Inglis describes the Irish father as playing virtually no part in emotion management tasks towards his children, because 'fathers believed that the expression of too much interest in children was a sign of immaturity' (196). This idea, however, is completely subverted at various points in Ronan's fiction.

For instance, in the short story mentioned above, 'Salthill', the mother does not care about the fact that she is pregnant and has no problem in giving the child up for adoption whereas the father, Ron, is not so sure. He has feelings for the child, even before it is born. 'She smoked a lot to pass the time, in spite of Ron's objections that it would harm the health of the child. She refused to think of the child as a person, and so could not believe that it had health to be damaged.'(4) Furthermore, the subversion of

stereotypes about the family unit and gender is even more obvious when we find out who is more responsible, and who is in charge of the housework.

He cooked them [potatoes] for her and they had potatoes and butter and tea. They ate in silence, but sometimes she would laugh at something known to herself alone, and he would smile at her in pathetically attempted empathy. Afterwards he cleared the plates into the sink while she sat and hummed to herself. (5)

This is highly significant because it is not a sharing the housework situation, or the man taking care of the housework while the woman is out of the house; he cooks and cleans up while she does absolutely nothing. Moreover, the fact that they are drifting emotionally apart, makes him resent his lust for her and 'he felt diminished by the physical comfort she took in him' (6), a feeling which one would traditionally expect a woman to sense. By the end of the story, Ron is walking home with his pregnant girlfriend and his homosexual friend, and pondering to himself that he 'had no idea how to overcome them and become a real person. The only solution he could see was to fade away and have no significance at all' (16).

In *Dixie Chicken*, there are many mixed images of family and fathers. The central character, Rory Dixon, is a married man, with a daughter, who cares deeply about his family, and this love is well stated throughout the book. Nevertheless, his fondness for his family is rivalled by his passion for life and his eagerness to experience as much as he can, and so he sleeps with almost every other female or male character in the book, including his best friend, the wife of his best friend, his wife's sister, and even his own daughter.

The husband of Rory's daughter is also the one who takes care of the baby and is responsible for the housework. Again, he has a job, and still minds the house and the child, while she does not do much more than watching television.

At six, the alarm went, without waking her. He got up to change and feed the baby before going to work. When he left at a quarter to seven, they were both snoring peacefully. He would have liked to kiss his sleeping wife goodbye before leaving, but he thought it might be better to leave things as they were, just in case. (52)

In addition to taking care of everything, he still has to cope with the fact that he knows that his wife, Corinna, sleeps around. He does nothing about it though, instead he sits at home crying, while blaming his wife's behaviour on himself. This is also

traditionally women's behaviour and it is what makes Ronan's family subversions work so well, though, as expected it does not go without a twist: not only does he sit at home, sobbing over his wife's infidelity, he gets aroused by it.

He knew that she slept around, but was too much in love with her to protest and tried not to think about it. When he did think about it he cried his guts out. On the other hand, when she returned and he thought she had been with someone else, he found himself extraordinarily aroused. He knew the nights when she had been with someone else because those were the nights when he didn't have to sleep in the other room, the nights she let him make love to her. Do what he might to stop it, he always imagined her with other men while they were fucking. It wasn't fantasy and it wasn't nightmare, but somewhere between the two. It was himself he hated for this, as though he were the unfaithful one. He never resented her for what he saw as his failing, because he loved her too much. (53)

He is not the one going down to the pubs to get drunk. His wife is. She will not answer to her married name, and when she arrives home, her husband has to almost beg for intimacy, trembling, 'knowing that she didn't like his eagerness to be near her' (51), and nevertheless he never regrets his marriage and considers himself lucky.

Corinna Dixon embodies the same type of subversion of conventional and long-established family roles from the mother's perspective. The Irish mother is subjected to stereotyping as well, due to the crucial role she had in passing religious faith from one generation to another, and her part in instilling discipline and instigating sexual repression. In 'Kenwood Chef', an autobiographical short story included in *Handsome Man are Slightly Sunburnt*, Ronan confesses that both he and his mother shared a passion for sweet things, and thus he conveys that 'it was baking and not the rosary which provided the bonding' in their house (149). That phrase seems to imply that his family was therefore an exception, and that the rosary was usually the centre of the mother-son relationship.

Inglis, in his reflection on the influence of the Church on Irish society, also considers the Irish mother's allegiance to the Church and 'her ability to rule morally over her husband and her children' which 'depended heavily on the support she received from the priest and Church teaching' (179). He argues that the Church gained control of women by gaining control of their sexual life and bodies. By being portrayed as weak and helpless, women became more likely to assume they needed protection by the Church. Confession serves as a means of attaining great knowledge over the woman's

sexuality and how she feels towards it, and that knowledge was generally, greater than that of her husband, which results in feelings of alienation on the part of the husbands.

In Ireland, it was the knowledge and control that priests and nuns had over sex which helped them maintain the power and control over women. Women especially were made to feel ashamed of their bodies. They were interrogated about their sexual feelings, desires and activities in the confessional. Outside the confessional there was a deafening silence. Sex became the most abhorrent sin. It was through the control of sex that the modern Irish mother and family were first created. The Church's strategy of keeping women ignorant about sex and their bodies was later maintained in and through the control of medical science and practice in Ireland. (188)

In this way, family and the home were a constant object of supervision by the Church. Inglis also asserts that the Irish mother's admiration for the priest was so great that the sexual and emotional repression and body discipline that she instilled on her children was caused by her desire to imitate the priest's celibate lifestyle. Another of the Church's tactics concerning women was to convince them that their place was at home, taking care of the husband and children, and to discourage them to try to seek fulfilment in any other way. This is very clear in Frank Ronan's *hOme*, in the way Bridey keeps inculcating fear through the Bible and makes Coorg strictly obey to any of the Church's teachings. It is not hard to imagine how oppressive her own children's childhood must have been, by the way they keep rebelling against it. On a rather interesting note, Coorg observes that back at the commune there was always laughter and that no one bothered to hide sex, which caused that nobody bothered to look either, whereas '[h]ere, the mush was all compressed in magazines stuffed under PJ's mattress' (154). Bridey and Ireland had made of sex something dirty, and unspeakable. Nevertheless, despite all those moral structures, the narrative is full of illegitimate children. Finally, we can also see the way Willy's mother still controls him tightly when he is around her, as well as his sisters, who never get to have lives of their own because of her.

In today's society, however, things no longer work exactly the same way. Inglis notes that:

When, as has been happening since the 1960's, Irish women are no longer dependent on the Church for power (having gained access to political and economic power), and, consequently, the Church loses its ability to control them and their sex, then one of the pillars, if not the foundation, of what has held the Church above Irish modern society begins to crumble and decay. (199)

Similarly to the study of the fathers in Frank Ronan's fiction, not only is this depiction of the Irish mother close to the stereotype, as the challenge of that stereotype is present as well. Concerning the mother, that subversion is most apparent in the form of the many references to a complete lack of motherly instincts by many female characters. Coorg's mother, for one, reveals such a lack right from the start:

Impervious to her maternal instincts, Brenda considered her responsibilities towards me to have been discharged with my delivery. Her nipples hurt and she refused to go on breast-feeding; went back instead to being the fairy child, as useless and enchanting as the son she had produced and, secretly though not unnoticeably, jealous of my rivalry in the winsome stakes. Fortunately for me Debora's maternal instincts were so overwhelming that her hormones were affected and she found herself expressing milk from virgin breasts. I, naturally, was allowed to take advantage. The phenomenon was accepted at the hOmestead as an ordinary proof of my extraordinary nature and as a sign that, since my welfare was safely in the hands of higher powers, everyone else could go about their business without troubling themselves unduly about my survival. (22-23)

Coorg also notices this quite unmistakably, as another kid starts off their first conversation with 'My mammy says you have no mammy' (102). Coorg scans his mental database for a mother figure and finds himself at a loss for words: 'I couldn't deny it. There had been no one in my life so far who fitted into the mammy parameters which, at that moment, stretched from Sean Breen's hairdressing mother to the obese slave woman in Shirley Temple films every Sunday afternoon' (102)

In 'Salthill', one of the short stories analysed above, young pregnant Josy has not even come to terms with the fact that it is a live human being she is carrying inside her, instead of just something she desperately wants to get rid of:

She was determined that, although she was temporarily incarcerated by this pregnancy, she would treat it was an illness, to be cured by adoption. There were times when she behaved as though the child had injured her, and she should have no conscience about injuring it in return. (9)

In *Dixie Chicken* there are also such examples. We have already analysed Corinna Dixon's relationship with her baby, but her own mother had hated being pregnant out of vanity, and once Corinna was born, she is overcome by jealousy toward the attention the baby gets from the father, her husband:

Helen loathed being pregnant. It made her feel ugly and powerless, and it was the beginning of her conviction that Rory was unfaithful to her. (...)

When Corinna was born and he saw his child, Helen saw undisguised love in his eyes, and that was intolerable to her. She tried to love her child and made all the conventional outward noises of motherhood, but she could never forgive a creature who had caused her such ugliness and pain, who in her own mind had lost her Rory's love, and who had earned Rory's instant love by nothing more than genetic coincidence. The birth isolated Helen completely, and those of Rory's friends who had tried to like her before now tolerated her only for his sake. (17)

However, this challenge of the stereotype does not limit itself to the lack of maternal instincts, for it goes on to the complete reversal of conventional roles to the extent that *The Men who Loved Evelyn Cotton* features a scene where one of Evelyn's friends speaks of domestic violence towards her husband, in front of her own children:

'I beat David up once,' said Emir. 'It was absolutely useless. He just said that it was a symbolic castration and he could never do it with me again. And he hasn't.'

Hugh winced with embarrassment. He thought that Emir must have forgotten the children were there. But the girls carried on nibbling their scones as if they heard it every day.

'Did you beat him up badly?' Evelyn asked her casually.

'Dreadfully,' said Emir, making a face. 'You know what a wimp he is. I had to stop because his shrieking upset the poultry. They wouldn't lay for weeks. It's a good thing my baby girls weren't there.'

Her baby girls all preserved their attitudes. It was true they were used to this, but they still writhed with shame inside themselves. Only Hugh, who came from a less liberal society, could see this. Suddenly, one of the girls asked if they could play outside, and they all vanished with handfuls of biscuit. (140)

Hard to notice is the sarcasm in pointing out that Hugh, who is Irish, came from a less liberal society, as if the concept of a liberal society or any kind of liberation would be able to be measured in terms of which gender is responsible for domestic violence.

On a different note, one last interesting passage concerning mothers is from *A Picnic in Eden*, when Adam is telling Dougie about his mother.

'I envy you. Your mother hated you, and so you are free of that. I had a mother who loved me and understood me, and just at the moment when she had raised my emotional expectations of this life to the highest, she went and died. She has spoilt every relationship for the rest of my life. No one can live up to a dead, perfect mother.' (108)

It is noteworthy that he quickly dismisses his father's theory that his hard childhood had been intentionally designed to be character building, and on the other hand that he sees his perfect relationship with his mother in the worst light possible, by

attributing the blame for the fact that he seems unable to have a loving, honest relationship, to his mother's death, at a time which seemed to make that perfection become crystallized forever.



This chapter has attempted to introduce Ronan's unconventional notions of family. The traditional family unit can present serious difficulties for people who do not really fit the norms or long for alternative lifestyles. Conrad's *Locked in the Family Cell*, and Inglis' *Moral Monopoly* helped us to frame Frank Ronan's fiction in the Irish context, relating general considerations of family and the ways in which it can be oppressive or restrictive to the specific case of Ireland, with its strong focus on religion and its high rate of alcoholism. This chapter also served to indicate how Ronan makes use of and perhaps cannot get away from certain Irish images and stereotypes, but, that throughout his fiction many of these are openly challenged. This analysis of relationships and connections will be continued in the next chapter, but instead of bloodlines its goal will be to examine romantic bonds within Ronan's work. In the same line of thought, the specificities of Irish discourse will be taken into consideration in the investigation of a distinct Irish gay voice in fiction.





## 4

### **Love Will Tear us Apart: Marriages, Arrangements and Romantic Friendships**

When routine bites hard, and ambitions are low  
And resentment rides high, but emotions won't grow  
And we're changing our ways, taking different roads  
Then love, love will tear us apart again

Ian Curtis, 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', 1979

This chapter seeks to broaden the study of relationships and their implications carried out in the previous one, but will be focusing on romantic connections. In Frank Ronan's fiction, many types of romantic bonds are represented in different degrees of attachment and success, but the main impression that lingers on is that most of these are presented realistically. The traditional fairy tale they-lived-happily-ever-after romantic ending is almost non-existent and there are many different reasons presented throughout Ronan's work for his couples (homosexual or heterosexual) to be together, almost none of which bears the notion of unconditional love that romantic literature has been promoting for centuries, and most of them show hardly any indication of love at all.

However, one form of relationship that seems to resist the inevitable unhappy ending is the close and intimate type of relationship between two people of the same sex, one that plays with seduction, flirtation and homoerotic attraction at times, but which is not explicitly depicted as a homosexual relationship, and for the most part its participants are involved in very little sexual/physical contact or none at all. This is often known as romantic friendship.

Given that this chapter aims at examining the differences between the distinct kinds of romantic ties, in an attempt to shed some light on the way love is presented throughout Ronan's entire body of work, certain aspects have to be taken into account. It can be argued that the notion of romantic friendship is too subjective, dependent on the interpretation and sensibility of the reader, making it more difficult to address from an academic point of view. In order to overcome such a problem, one first needs to reflect on the issue of what exactly is or can be considered gay literature. In a project of this nature, one is constantly facing this very question, always wondering whether this or that work or this or that author can be accurately included when making certain points about gay literature.

Gregory Woods, author of many works devoted to gay literature, has given much thought to this question in various essays. He has analysed three different models, considering the dissimilar approaches to the subject. The first describes gay literature in its 'strict and narrowest sense' ('Gay Literature'), that is literature that has emerged after Stonewall, and therefore post gay liberation movement. According to this model, only writers that 'identify as gay and subscribe to the ethos and ideology of gay liberation; and who also – and this does not, by any means, follow automatically – identify themselves as gay writers or lesbian writers', ('Gay Literature'). Woods describes the literature included in such a model as often affirmative and celebratory, especially after the AIDS epidemic. This model is nevertheless highly reductive and presents a problem given that such authors predominate in the West, since in other cultures there might not be such a sense of gay collectivity, or may present a 'lesser investment in the apparently fixed labels of sexual identity' ('Gay Literature').

The second model Woods refers to is more expansive and inclusive but still does not satisfy him, or me, for that matter. This perspective has to do with the post Foucauldian dating of homosexuality to the coining of the word, addressed in the first chapter of this dissertation. According to this model, one can only consider work from authors emerging after German theorists came up with the term, therefore leaving, as Woods notes, Shakespeare or Whitman out. Both perspectives exclude too easily and possess a further drawback in common: they tend to presuppose that in order to write gay literature, one needs to be gay. Relying on the sexuality of an author necessarily means that his or her inclusion in any gay canon would have to depend on biographical evidence, which may sometimes prove to be difficult or impossible, for as Woods also

underlines, the lack of information on a given author's sexuality results in an assumption of heterosexuality until proven otherwise.

The last model is the one Woods considers the less restrictive, for it relies on practice in order to define a text as gay or lesbian literature. In another essay where Woods reflects upon this question he draws on the words of Bonnie Zimmerman: 'If a text lends itself to a lesbian reading, then no amount of biographical proof ought to be necessary to establish it as a lesbian text' ('Lesbian Feminist Criticism'). In the same line of thought Woods concludes that 'a gay text is one which lends itself to the hypothesis of a gay reading (*Articulate Flesh*). This notion opens up possibilities and suggests that 'all literature is potentially gay' ('Literary Historiography and the Gay Common Reader'). In this way, he argues, this 'most generous or capacious model is that which opens up the whole of literature, globally and transhistorically, to the transformative scrutiny of the gay reader' ('Gay Literature', 1895).

This perspective on gay literature centred on the reader's sensibility allows us to study the romantic relationships in Ronan's work without having to attempt to draw a strict line between love and friendship, especially when the line seems to be deliberately filmy and feeble. It helps that some of the romantic friendships displayed in his fiction and examined in this chapter do involve a certain degree of physical intimacy. But there are cases in which this does not happen, and thus the reader is free to perceive the friendships throughout the books with or without sexual tension, given that these distinctions have therefore more to do with reading than writing.

However, what leaves hardly any room for doubts or interpretation is Ronan's treatment of what may be termed 'conventional' romantic relationships, as opposed to the type of friendship we have been discussing.

*Dixie Chicken* is a good place to begin in the consideration of such themes not only because it contains many reflections on love and its effect on relationships, but mainly because these reflections are supposed to emanate from God himself. For one thing, we find out that God does not believe in marriage: 'No marriage is possible. No two people can sustain themselves equally in a union. The best you can hope for is that each will take it turn to abase themselves before the need of the other'. (16)

It is ironic to have God stating his disbelief in marriage. Although it does not take much to acknowledge the difficulty of having two people in a relationship maintaining the same amount of power, the word 'abase' seems to suggest that the need for another person is to be seen as humiliating or degrading. Furthermore, in another passage, God

seems to attribute the failure of marriage to self-loathing: 'Who could you love enough' he muses, 'and at the same time despise enough to burden with the curse of being your consort?' (14). In this way, you not only need to love someone but also to hate that person enough to curse them with your existence in their lives. It is not that all the relationships presented throughout the book are entirely loveless. They are not. People do care for each other, but not in terms of romantic or unconditional love.

We have already looked into Corinna Dixon's marriage to David Kennedy in the previous chapter. Corinna is unfaithful and shows no signs of loving or actually appreciating her husband. He is said to feel immense love for her, and yet he is excited by the thought of her with other men. In this marriage, the wise words of God apply perfectly, as he makes the case for the impossibility of equality in union. In this case, all the power is held by Corinna, for it is she who 'allows' David to sleep with her.

In her own father's, Rory Dixon's, marriage, to speak of love is also a rather complicated business. Again, Rory is said to love his wife, but then again, he literally loves everybody. His wife seems highly paranoid about his infidelity and spends most of their married life looking incessantly but in vain for real evidence of his unfaithfulness. Interestingly, Rory is presented throughout the book as the reasonable bloke, whereas she is seen as paranoid, scandalous and difficult to deal with. Little or no emphasis is given to the fact that she is, after all, right. But her love for Rory is also neither unconditional or selfless. The novel is constructed in such a way that the most of the characters seem to think of themselves as in love but the narrative tells us otherwise. She is faithful, but the kind of love in which she engages leaves much to be desired. It is portrayed as an obsession:

In twenty years of marriage there wasn't anything she hadn't accused Rory of. All she required was one shred of evidence which substantiated one accusation, and then her life might be her own again. Her life, for a long time, had consisted of nothing but loving and hating Rory Dixon, of being suffocated by obsessive thinking of him. There were times when she would easily have killed him out of self-preservation, and had only been stopped by that same sense of self-preservation. (29)

In this way, Helen is presented as a woman obsessed with her husband, not only with finding proof of his unfaithfulness, but also obsessed about him, inasmuch as she loses her sense of self in the process. 'It could be' God tells us, 'that she loved him too much and not well enough. She liked him best when he was asleep and she could keep an eye on him' (30). In this way, love in Ronan's fiction is not just a word that speaks for

itself, it needs to be measured in terms of quantity and quality. In this equation, as demonstrated in the last quote, quantity is hardly a synonym for quality, and its excess also proves to be harmful. The fact that she loves him most when he is asleep shows that it has all to do with possession and control rather than love. In another passage we can read that:

In those first months Helen was suspended somewhere between happiness and bewilderment. At one instant she believed that she loved him so much that she would do anything for him, and at another instant she would find that an instinct to tame him was gnawing at her love. She had not married him for his wildness but despite it. (14)

Again, the desire for control, the will to tame, and the challenges of power seem easily mistaken for love. This neurotic desire makes Helen completely disregard her own self and start to think only in terms of the other person, leaving her without a life of her own, and therefore completely lost upon his death.

And she stayed with him because she could think of nothing else. Even if she thought of leaving him, she thought of it only in terms of the effect it might have on him. She never got as far as thinking what she would do to herself. (18)

This is not the picture of a healthy kind of love, and indeed there is no healthy kind of love anywhere throughout the book. 'Because, whether we like it or not, we recognise our mates the moment they track us down, and most of us bow to the inevitable after that, and call it love' (11). Such an explanation serves to reduce what we call love to the simple facts of nature, and the words 'mates, and 'track down' seem to be there in order to show that we are the only animals who complicate it.

Another of the reasons that creeps into Ronan's prose in *Dixie Chicken* to justify God's disbelief in marriage is, of course, that of habit and routine. Jody and Kay form the other couple in the story, and their relationship (apart from the fact that both of them have affairs with Rory) is described in terms of routine, to the point of Jody keeping a menstrual calendar of his wife in order to control her moods, and sex becoming traditional as opposed to exciting:

He wondered if it was pre-menstrual tension, and tried counting back the weeks to her last period. There was a time when he kept a menstrual calendar for her. It started as a joke, but in reality it was very useful. It made the whole process seem a bit more

rational in some respects. He couldn't remember why he had stopped doing it, but it must have been about the time that sex between them ceased to be a reaction and became a process – the scratching of an itch for the sake of co-existence. (39)

In the same fashion, the main characters in *The Better Angel*, John G. and Smallgoods, share relationships with their girlfriends which are far from exciting, and seem to be only in the background of their own connection, which will be further explored in this chapter. John G.'s relationship with Jean Spat had already been predicted by Smallgoods before the pair had even met. When they eventually met, they started kissing half drunk at a party, and began dating long before the word love is ever mentioned. He seems to be afraid of her at times. The affair goes on and its development is scarcely mentioned in the narrative as opposed, for example, to John's feelings towards Smallgoods or even to Smallgoods' affair with Elsa, which seems much more relevant to John G.'s narration than his own. The first time John G. mentions the word love connected to Jean happens during what he calls the happiest month of his life. However, this happiness has nothing to do with Jean and a lot with the fact that Smallgoods stayed over for the duration of that month. John tells Smallgoods that he thinks he might be in love with Jean, only to hear Smallgoods bitter reply that there was no such thing as love, only self delusion (161). These words echo those from *Dixie Chicken* regarding relationships. After this conversation he tries it on Jean. With his girlfriend, the phrasing does not change, and he tells her that he 'thinks' he 'might' be in love with her, to which she replies matter-of-factly that she knows. His conclusion on the subject is drawn upon hers, for he assumes then that if she also thinks he is in love, then he must be (162). These words are hardly filled with certainty and the conversation, even though held in bed, after sex, quickly shifts to Smallgoods and his feelings towards him, until Jean puts her arm around his thigh, 'possessively' (162).

Regarding Smallgoods' connection to Elsa, love keeps playing a very limited role in the equation. They are together, because she needed to leave her husband, not because they are overcome with romantic feelings and intentions of being together forever. When they moved in together, his friend Jean asked him about love:

'She's moving in with me,' he said. 'In Mallow Street.'  
'Are you in love with her?'  
'Sometimes. She thinks I am.'  
'I suppose you told her that.'

‘She asks me at awkward times. I have to say yes. And there’s the chance it might be true. I am and I amn’t. What do you think?’

‘Ask your friend John G.,’ she said.

He sat on the draining board while he thought about that, and eventually he said, ‘I see what you mean.’ (96)

As we have seen before, there is no certainty in answers regarding love. It feels like John G. and Smallgods are doing things because they think they should rather than any particular instinct. And once more, John G. is creeping into the conversation, as it would happen if it was the other way around, leaving us to believe that the only feelings these two friends are sure about are towards each other. In another passage, Smallgods feels very emotional as Elsa tells him her life story. But this time, he is almost sure about ruling love out of those emotions: ‘When she looked at Smallgods, there were tears in his eyes. She thought it must be love, and he let her think it. But while his eyes were wet, his mind was trying to work out the difference between love and pity.’ (99)

Moving on to *The Men who Loved Evelyn Cotton*, we find another novel filled with this kind of liaisons, caused by something other than love or romantic certainty. Evelyn’s first marriage takes place under very specific circumstances. She was a single mother and accepted a proposal from someone willing to give her a home and a clean name. She quickly found out what he wanted in exchange, and considered it a rather unfair trade.

It could have been boredom that drove her away from the don. It could have been that she realised the preposterousness of her position. She had assumed at first that he had married her for sex, and she waited week after week for him to demand his conjugal right. When it became plain that he had no interest in her body, or in her ability as a housekeeper, or her companionship, she began to be uneasy. She had no obvious function, and seemed to be giving him nothing in return for his patronage. She wondered if he was dissatisfied with her in some way, but was too polite to say so. She felt at times as though she had defrauded him, at times as though he had defrauded her. (13)

From this passage, it is clear that she would be ready to admit a marriage in which sex was the currency, but that was not the case. Her husband wanted something deeper, something she was not willing or perhaps even capable of providing.

And it all came out. She discovered her function in the don’s life. She was thrown out of her complacency and gratitude. She was only the latest in a long line of single mothers whom he had married to complete his idea of a household. She was part of his delusion of order, as much as the shelves of ironed shirts and collars. She could be

replaced the next day by any girl with any child and the don would see no difference. (14)

Even though she had deliberately walked into marriage with the knowledge that it would be handled like any kind of business, and that she had to pay for protection and for being looked after, Evelyn regarded endless gratitude too high a price to be able to pay. She does leave him, but it does not take long until she seeks protection in the arms of another man. Once more, the narrator has no difficulty in recognizing in this marriage another functional arrangement, despite its being an improvement compared to the previous one.

I don't mean to be nasty about Charles Felix. He may not have given Evelyn security, but he did give her a feeling of normality. She was allowed to do his laundry for him. In that sense he was an improvement on the don. But, on the other hand, he became involved with Evelyn within days of his old girlfriend moving out on him. Evelyn was a convenient replacement. Perhaps there was no love in this arrangement. (16)

Again there is, admittedly, no love involved. Things seem to happen in people's lives out of trying to fill in for something they are missing, but no one in the stories seems to have a very specific idea of what it is. Relationships are built in order to fill certain voids, at very convenient times, and for very specific purposes. Evelyn does end up realizing that she played no special part in Felix's life and that she was with him only because she had to look out for her son, Benedict. She eventually leaves him, but for another man she was having an affair with out of boredom and revenge, Julius, whom she stays with, for the most part of the novel. Julius is a mean person, with a bad character, highly critical of everyone else, selfish, self-centred and extremely miser. She stays with him for so long for at that time she was not ready yet to deal with the ambition that was building up inside of her, and she thinks that his criticism serves to bring her back to reality.

When Julius spoke to her sharply, or criticised her, she felt he was the only one who had real insight into her character. That he knew the real her; the woman who was afraid and hiding behind a curtain of red hair. She was in the power of Julius. He could make her cry with one word or even a look. He could order her to leave the house and she would sit, weeping on the door step with nowhere to go, hoping for his forgiveness, feeling her complete dependence on him. He ruled her by his cleverness and selfishness. By playing with her feelings of guilt and inadequacy. By his built-in feeling of male superiority and his professions of good intention. I know how he did it and why he did it because I've done it also. (33)



This passage is very clear about the way he plays her. Slowly, she starts to become more conscious about the rules of this game and more aware of his techniques.

He had floored her before he had finished speaking. The first glaze of tears was forming over her contact lenses. It took him a bit longer these days than it used to, to poke at her guilt and feelings of inadequacy until she wept. It used to take only one carefully chosen remark. Now it needed a long paragraph. But you had to have tears before you could hope for reconciliation, and you couldn't win without reconciliation. He was smiling at her now. A smile was meant to convey his forgiveness of her. That is how she interpreted this smile of his. You or I might interpret it differently. (49)

It took her a long while to come to terms with the fact that this dependence that she felt of him was pure fiction, that he was only holding her back. But, at a lack of confidence to change, not even this made her leave him.

That was the moment she braced herself for a life of her own.

It is not true that this was Evelyn's first clear and distanced glimpse of the real Julius. They had been together for fifteen years. There had been times, in the Sixties, when he had thrown her out of the house, and left her wailing on the door step. Unless you are very stupid, it is difficult to live with someone for that length of time and be unaware of what they are capable of. This knowledge, this suspicion, is generally lost in the complication of keeping things going from day to day. What happened here, in the Bennett's sitting-room, was that (...) Evelyn's abstract suspicions of him came to her all at once. For the first time, he struck her as being completely despicable: he was no longer an everyday faulted character of rather ordinary magnitude.

She became aware of the pressure of him herding her into a position that was favourable to himself. She had no idea what he wanted her to do, or of his motives for wanting it, but she could see, at last, that he was operating a game plan which he had structured and which he had initiated. (54)

Even after having realized the true nature of her husband's character, Evelyn is not completely put off by it. In an interesting comparison with her cat, the narrator points out that they have everything in common, except for the instinct of survival, that he thinks Evelyn lacks. Because she is a writer, she is fascinated and she 'would feel compelled to stay and observe the minutiae of her own destruction' (54). She decides to stay, out of curiosity, to find out just how far he is willing to go, while, in her mind she is already planning a book dealing with manipulative, overbearing men.

Apart from Evelyn's there are other strange, loveless marriages in the book. There is that of Hilda and Ned Bennet, who form the most peculiar couple, for the husband keeps inventing affairs to make himself more interesting, and for that purpose finds lame

excuses to make his wife suspect these imaginary affairs, while the wife, who takes pride in her ingenuity, and believes these excuses rather than suspecting of anything, which is not really happening to begin with (53). Furthermore, there is the narrator's case. The narrator is supposed to be in love with Evelyn. But, at a closer look, this love is little more than an obsession, and in the last pages of the book he admits to Evelyn that she does not love him back, otherwise she would also be obsessed about him (179). From this it is very clear that he believes that love and obsession are synonyms and that one does not exist without the other. He gets married to Sally, but of course he is in love with Evelyn, so once again the chances for a happy marriage are slim. He recognizes that he has never cared for his wife and kids, he admits playing his wife into an erroneous sense of dependency and his own superiority, and he calls enticing his wife into love making, 'troubling' her.

By the end of the book, Evelyn does find someone more suitable to her and finally she appears to have found love at last. He is much younger and he is Irish which makes him much different in certain aspects, and their relationship is rocky instead of idyllic, but that only seems to make the case for Ronan's preoccupation with a realistic portrayal of relationships. However, this, as most of Ronan's narratives, is left open, so we can not be sure of how it really turned out for them.

In *A Picnic in Eden*, we can find more of these caring, but rather loveless relationships. Furthermore, throughout the novel, there is much evidence of ways in which love can be harmful. In the initial pages of the book, Dougie Millar's father commits suicide over a woman who did not have the slightest interest in him. Adam's mother's love for his father is seen as damaging for her, for she believed him too much, and was too blinded by that feeling to become aware of his alcohol dependency.

There must have been a man worth knowing at some point, because Niamh Parnell fell in love with him and married him, and the evidence suggests that she loved him until the day she died. In general she was an incisive woman who wouldn't suffer fools, and chose her friends with such circumspection that by the age of thirty she didn't have any; but she still managed to believe most of the things her husband told her. Perhaps his plausibility was her downfall. Perhaps we have to blame love, and the lesson of this is that one mustn't be fooled into falling in love. No good can come of it. (29)

Perhaps because of this example in his own family, Adam Parnell, the main character and narrator, never managed to really fall in love. He sees himself as in love at some points in the story, but quickly changes his mind every time. The first time Adam

made love to his future wife Norah, the first words he spoke to her in the morning after were: 'I don't believe in love, but if I had to choose one position to be locked into for the rest of my life, it would be this one' (35). He is manifesting his distrust in love from the beginning, and the truth is that by the end of the book, there are increasingly frequent times where he can hardly stand her body snuggled against him. This moment is stated as the beginning of her love for him, but even before the end of the same page, she is said to feel lost in this love of hers. Their relationship is described as in need of very little conversation: 'Anything that needed to be said could be conveyed in terse telegraphic sentences, half in Latin. When they were alone together, there would be a great flow of words from her, which he would listen to as an abstract sound, for the pleasure of hearing her voice' (35). This passage is quite clear about the lack of communication between them and the narrative seems to convey that their marriage is much more based on sharing common interests such as the plant nursery, than anything else. As soon as she utters her desire to have children, their relationship gets bitter and he wonders if he had ever loved her. At one time, he feels attracted towards her as she's standing in the garden, but he senses that this lust of his is connected to an 'aesthetic excitement' and thinks to himself that life would be perfect if one could only have relationships with flowers (37). Later on in the book, there is another example of how he really feels. Again on the very same page, as he starts to think that he might love her after all, in two paragraphs he is already asking himself how he managed to live around her for so long (72). He tells her that there could never be any real friendship or honesty in marriage due to the fact that you have to ponder everything you say, for it will affect your life too. Things do not get better towards the end of the narrative. It gets to the point where she tells him she feels she is losing him and that they are reaching the 'beginning of the end', though Adam 'could think of several answers to that, but he couldn't summon the interest to make any of them' (98). Adam, while reflecting upon things comes to a conclusion about their marriage:

They married each other not only because of love; but because it had seemed that they wanted the same things in life. And once they had achieved those things the small unspoken differences that had been pushed to the edge assumed monstrous proportions. (111)

This idea seems to exist in most, if not all the relationships portrayed in Ronan's novels. Either marriages are built upon convenient arrangements, and even so, fail

disastrously, or even if there is a hint of love involved, it is not nearly enough to maintain a relationship for life. Most of the characters in the various books plainly state their disbelief in love, and that it is the bearer of portentous and wonderful things. Whether the reader is supposed to make out that there is simply no such thing as love, or that that is not the reason why people get together in real life, or rather that it might even exist but would not work in a for-life context, is not unmistakably stated. But the fact remains that no happily married couples subsist or even make an appearance in Ronan's novels.

Nevertheless, bearing in mind that the object of our scrutiny is gay discourse, one could easily make the case that this gloomy and bitter view of marriage and long lasting relationships could be seen as a critique of heterosexual relationships. Based on the documented discredit of these relationships in the novels, and the ghosts of romantic friendships haunting them, and assuming that much of the gay literature written after Stonewall is careful in presenting gay characters as flawless and as role models when compared to heterosexual ones, in an attempt to make literature live up to the goals of gay liberation, this could be one way to look at it. There is, nevertheless, another of Ronan's novels, *Lovely* (1996), which clearly prevents this hypothesis from being seen as valid. *Lovely* is centred around a gay 'love' story. It is impossible to write of it as a 'love' story without the inverted commas, as is also clearly visible in the praising reviews one can read on the covers, for love has really very little to do with it. The *Irish Times* calls it a 'rich, provocative, hopeful and hopeless vision of 'everlasting love'', and the *Gay Times* calls it a 'witty and cynical 'love' story'. The truth is that this novel features a relationship even more disastrous than the previously analysed ones. It is interesting to notice again the realistic approach Ronan never fails to present, resisting a temptation I suppose every gay writer must have, of displaying gay characters in the best possible light. In this story, the gay characters are as good and as bad as anyone else, and even admitting that one of the characters, Aaron, is far better natured than the others, and much easier to sympathise and empathise with, none of them lacks virtues and flaws, and none of them is presented in a simplistic way. Aaron and Nick's relationship starts off in India. They are both on holidays, and they meet each other in a festival where drugs and alcohol run like tap water. They both start speaking of endless love without getting really to know each other, which is rather ironic for the reader who has already had a small glimpse of their personalities and even more for the second time reader. Their faith in

this 'love', and the fact that they fail to see that it is much more of a hope than a certainty, is what ultimately leads to their downfall.

Those were the days when everything had come out right. They knew, for certain, that every action and incident and disaster of their existences had led to this point. Meaning colonised the universe. Concepts like death and infinity which used to have them shaking in their separate beds if they considered them, no longer had the power of overwhelming. They knew what absolute love was, infinity was within their control, and death was no more than an incident in a progression of events which was fated to have the best of all possible resolutions. They had reached the point where they thought they had earned the right to live happily ever after. (38)

In fact, this paragraph can be described as nothing but cynical by all those who are aware of the real progression of the story, for in no other of Frank Ronan's novels is there such a catastrophic relationship. Even so, on the same very page, Nick starts to imagine he is being swallowed by love and finds excuses to leave the room. However, this, at this point, does not seem unreasonable, for it is not hard to imagine that you might need some space, living twenty four hours under the same roof with your newly found everlasting love, but whom you still hardly know. Their personalities unfold as the narrative progresses and we are able to see the pleasure Nick takes in playing with Aaron's frail ego (43), or how Aaron keeps apologising for everything all the time, especially when it was not his fault to begin with (44, 65). Even at the beginning of this relationship it is not hard to realise that it was something they set out to do, that they found not only convenient, but too right an opportunity to let it slide.

He decided that he could spend the rest of his life with Aaron, loving only him. Aaron was the sort of man he needed: good enough to look after him and attractive enough to keep him interested. (45)

Nick's calculations sound almost like a mathematical equation, and it is very plain how he is inclined to be with Aaron because he thinks he is the sort of man he should be with. Nick is very clear in his considerations, hoping that if he could 'become part of Aaron's life, he could somehow achieve all that stability by proxy' (48). Aaron, although much more reasonable and perhaps involved in the relationship does not seem to be filled with unconditional love either, as we begin to realize that deep down inside, he is being driven by stubbornness and the certainty that he had never failed in anything he set out to do (49). Nick's best friend, Cathy is very doubtful about their relationship, but

Nick assumes she is only jealous of his happiness. She states that she does not believe in love, something which is stated bluntly by at least one character in all of Ronan's novels. Another thing that we encounter frequently is that Nick is enjoying the sensation of being loved a lot more than the other way around (68). When Nick falls ill, and Aaron sees him through it, wiping up vomit and other indignities, Nick realises he could have never done for Aaron what Aaron was doing for him (78). Furthermore, it is very interesting to notice how, upon the realisation of Aaron's real goodness, Nick's reaction is one of fear, rather than, for example, feeling of security or gratefulness (78). Even sex is tricky for them, as Nick considers Aaron to be oversexed, rather than facing the fact that their attraction is not that mutual, and when he sees Aaron in the mood, he sometimes has to 'make a show of generous acquiescence' (95). Nick seems to get aroused thinking of Aaron but not in his presence. In a gay relationship, sex roles are often indicators of differences between partners. Sometimes that difference might be in terms of gender, the one who stays on top often being seen as the 'man' in the relationship, but this does not occur in this case, or for that matter, in any other homoerotic relationship depicted in Ronan's fiction. There is actually a total absence of effeminate characters. What can be apparent also from sex roles, from the difference between active and passive (words that already carry a charged meaning), and is clear in the description of this specific relationship, is a difference in terms of power. Aaron agrees to let Nick make love to him, but Nick keeps finding excuses not to reciprocate. As they get back from holidays, Aaron soon finds out that he too is not content sexually, for he considers Nick's ways too mechanical and pragmatic.

Though he was erect again, and bursting with it this time, he was not used to sex being dealt with so pragmatically. In India, with the heat and the drugs, lust had seemed more like an itch that could be scratched mechanically, but now that he was in domestic surroundings with a clear mind, he wanted something that was more like love. (136)

The description of sex as scratching an itch, rather than something more like love, echoes the same kind of comparison used in *Dixie Chicken*.

Another problem with their relationship is that Nick, besides being an alcoholic, is a compulsive liar. 'As far as he was concerned, the only criterion for a statement to be true, was that it should be believable' (144). It is not that Aaron does not become aware, though he does take his time, of these problems, but his faith in himself does not allow him to abandon such a situation, for he would have to consider it a failure, and he is

clearly not ready to do so. He does, however, as he realises how easily Nick tells a lie without losing face start to suspect that he too might have fallen in love based on false premises (201). Here, love is described as a 'sort of fanaticism', entailing 'a belief which will override any evidence that the love is mistaken' (145). Maybe because of this, Aaron never loses faith in Nick, or rather, in his own ability to change him. Even Nick himself recognises this and tells him 'so you just love me because you think you have to be right about everything' (146).

Aaron's best friend Brian tells him that he looks like someone in love, but this makes him look 'as though he were under hypnosis', with 'the eyes of an addict'; and the voice 'was dead, though it spoke of knowing what it was to be alive' (171). During that conversation with his friend, Aaron tells him that his being with Nick is a part of his wanting to know life, the excitement of it. But he stresses the fact that he and his friend, due to having a fairly reasonable, problem free life, end up living in a sort of ivory tower, and do nothing to help people who have more serious problems. He describes Nick in the following terms: 'He is all the things we always droned on about and never took responsibility for' (174). It is as if Aaron felt responsible for Nick's behaving the way he does, just because Aaron did well in his life. He seems obsessed in wanting to save Nick, in seeing the so-called real life. Further ahead, Aaron's stubbornness in achieving his goal is apparent in the following passages:

If he couldn't take one human and love him into goodness, then the whole of his life and everything he had believed in was a sham. Aaron believed in goodness the way others believed in God or capitalism. He wanted to be a good person in the way that others want health or fame or power. (204)

It is very clear what he wants in life, and that he will stop at nothing to get it. He is convinced that Nick did not stumble into his life by chance, that all of it had a purpose, sort of like a test that he would have to pass.

It was no accident then that he had fallen in love with someone like Nick, at a time when he was looking for a new direction. Like an evangelist, having secured his own faith he had set out to spread the word. Not that that was the reason he had fallen in love. That had more to do with an accident of physical attraction. It was, however, the reason he was stuck with that love; the reason he couldn't give up on Nick. The more it became obvious that Nick needed his help, the more they were tied together. (204)

Given this, the comparison of Aaron as some kind of evangelist is particularly clever. His pride in always doing the right thing makes him not want to give up on Nick, and he recognizes that it is what keeps them together. He even admits that their 'falling in love' was 'accidental' and 'physical'. It seems to me that giving up would mean not only to prove Aaron wrong, but also to invalidate everything they had gone through so far, all that undying love they were said to have felt. Not even when Aaron sees a therapist who tells him, quite straightforwardly, that there is no way out of that situation except to walk away. This opinion was given not only by a professional, but by someone who confesses to having gone through the same. Nevertheless, Aaron is not convinced and the end of the story is the dreadful realisation that this was a terrible mistake. They have a terrible fight, Nick hits Aaron, Aaron storms off in his car, has an accident and lies in his hospital bed telling his mother that Nick is not so bad after all, and that they will be together if he tries hard enough. What he does not know is that he had been living with a murderer, who, as Aaron speaks, has trashed his entire place and is planning to set it on fire. Also in the book, there is another gay couple which breaks up, due to different views on monogamy, and how a relationship should be built. It is, thus, very hard not to consider this novel as a distillation of Ronan's satires of romantic relationships which we have been examining, with its highly cynical gaze and world-wearily witty remarks regarding what links human beings together.

The kind of behaviour displayed by Nick Lovely is also apparent in some of the short stories in *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt*. Interestingly, this type of behaviour shows up especially in stories concerning gay relationships. In 'The Sticky Carpet', the narrator, not yet fully recovered from his previous relationship, is taken to a restaurant and has a flashback of the past:

That brought visions of all the restaurant meals in the past; of attempted conversation and long inebriated silences between a couple who were painfully in love and had nothing in common; of him being so drunk that he would vomit across the tablecloth and of me carrying him out under the pitying glare of the management. (144)

Furthermore, 'Duck in Red Cabbage' tells another tale of alcoholism, of a man torn between his hope that his partner might recover, even upon the realization that his boyfriend had come home from the rehabilitation clinic completely drunk, and the idea forming in his mind, encouraged by his friends that he should get out while he is still alive (171).



By examining the novels, one comes to the conclusion that happy endings in Ronan's fiction are rare or non-existent. The best possible scenario happens when the narrative is left unfinished, leaving the hope for a happy ending. Endings are a pertinent subject when dealing with gay discourse, for endings have been changing throughout history, as perspectives on gay liberation and politics shift. The literary period after Stonewall is quite distinct, in terms of endings, than that before Stonewall. Michael Stanton asserts that novels featuring male homosexuality are 'as old as the form itself', though 'novels in which male homosexuality is central are a relatively recent phenomenon' ('Novel: Gay Male'). He compares these novels to others that revolve around the theme of searching for an identity. However, he finds a fundamental difference in early gay fiction, for it tends to 'present situations in which the protagonist refuses to admit who or what he is, or, having acknowledged his sexuality, find that his identity is repugnant to society at large' ('Novel: Gay Male').

In 'American Literature: Gay Male, 1900 – 1969', Joseph Cady recognizes a boom in this kind of novels since the 1950s, but acknowledges that, often due to compromises authors had to make in order to have their work published, the depiction of gay lives was usually associated with 'violence, suicide, murder, or other kinds of pathetic death or at best with lives of freakish and isolation'.

But this increased public depiction of homosexuality was usually tinged with misery, when it was not totally bleak. It was as if gay male writers in these years were subject to a rule of concessiveness (either explicit or tacit), in which the price of greater public access was the confirming of homosexual stereotypes. ('American Literature: Gay Male, 1900 – 1969').

After Stonewall, however, and as soon as the gay liberation movement took hold, many self-identified gay writers made a point of changing these tragic endings, even if it meant deliberately sacrificing the plot. Gregory Woods writes, in his *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*, that gay literature produced in the seventies was meant to provide its readers with role models that would embody the kind of happiness that post-liberation gay life was supposed to offer. He also conveys that these writers would make a deliberate, conscious effort to do so. For instance, he states that such authors sought to make sure that no central gay character was to be murdered or to commit suicide, even if it was for reasons that had nothing to do with homosexuality, out of attempting to stop the myth of the tragic queer.

At the present day, these concerns about endings are not as strict. Although there is still the need to endorse positive images, other writers also value the necessity to portray reality as they perceive it, rather than how they would like it to be. Michael Stanton, in the conclusion of his article, writes that:

Still, now is an exciting time to be a gay writer. A widespread acceptance of homosexuality coexists with manifest homophobia. How the gay novel will deal with this condition is a question continually being answered. ('Novel: Gay Male')

Bearing this in mind, it is difficult to say whether Ronan's propensity for unhappy endings is programmatically tied to any of the positions described above. On the one hand, one can argue that the theme of lack of tolerance towards gay relationships is a theme that is absent from Ronan's work altogether, so it is difficult to maintain that the idea is to portray reality accurately. But the fact remains that finding a gay couple that stays together in what could be described as a happy ending is a hard task for Ronan's readers. However, one needs to take into consideration that the straight characters and the heterosexual relationships portrayed in the books are not exactly the perfect picture of bliss either. This tendency for the tragic ending can even be seen as specifically Irish. In *Love in a Dark Time*, Tóibín argues that:

The idea that gay writing has a tendency to deal in the tragic and the unfulfilled, a tendency which Forster and writers after Stonewall sought to counteract, has echoes in Irish writing, which seems at its most content when there is a dead father or a dead child (Leopold Bloom's father committed suicide; his son is dead) and domestic chaos. No Irish novel ends in a wedding. Images of domestic bliss occur in novels like *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) and Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (1989), only to be mercilessly destroyed. The strongest images in Irish fiction, drama and poetry are of brokenness, death, destruction. The plays are full of shouting, the poetry is full of elegy, the novels are full of funerals. (28)

As stated before, the bonds that seem able to resist the tests of time throughout his work appear in the form of romantic friendships. The study of these friendships is significant for it provides a lens in which other arrangements of homosocial relationships in our culture can be viewed. Besides, it is of crucial interest in the examination of attitudes towards this kind of behaviour and how they have been changing throughout the different evolutionary eras. In the ancient world, that is Greece, Rome and Palestine, these friendships were common and embraced. Cicero's *De Amicitia* (44 BC) privileges and celebrates this form of union and is described by John Watkins as evoking 'the

language of erotic union in hailing the mixture of two friends' souls in a single consciousness' ('Romantic Friendship: Male'). During the middle ages, the spread of Christianity helped the process of building strong, close and sometimes passionate friendships between, for example, monks in monasteries. According to John Watkins, this went on through the Renaissance and the Reformation, the main literary examples being Montaigne's 'De l'amitié' (1580), Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (1596) and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1596). However, the following centuries saw an alarming rise of homophobia that intimidated male friendships, which started being regarded in different ways. C.S. Lewis observes in *The Four Loves* (1960) that to the ancients, friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves, whereas in the modern world, it is ignored. He also adds that the friendships that a man might have nowadays, have very little to do with that *Philia* which Aristotle classified among the virtues or that *Amicitia* on which Cicero wrote a book.

The same passed with female romantic friendships. Until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intense and close relationships between women, often white middle or upper-class women, were quite common and perceived as normal. Lilian Faderman observes that it was easier to consider these intimate friendships innocent and non-sexual for the general view was that women were generally sexually passionless (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*). Therefore, only in a post-Freudian era could these bonds be seen as lesbian, instead of socially acceptable.

In Ronan, it is as if this form of bonding was above any other form of relationship, for these friendships seem to be the only ones that actually last. We have already seen the way in which the two friends from *The Better Angel*, John G. and Smallgoods are unable to carry on a conversation about love without mentioning or having to think of each other. At one point in the narrative, Smallgoods talks about leaving town to join the British Army, leaving John G. devastated with the news. He becomes so miserable that Smallgoods feels the need to make perfectly clear: 'Listen. You aren't my wife' (119). John G. tells him not to go to England. He says he will miss him, to which Smallgoods answers that he cannot stay just to prevent him from being lonely. It is interesting to note that neither his family, nor his girlfriend are able to prevent John G. from being lonely; only his friend has the power to do that. Also noteworthy is that this conversation takes place in the dark, on a night walk by the river. Smallgoods spent the day full of 'army bravado and other nonsense', but 'when he was invisible in the dark he could be himself again' (119). When he finally does leave, he realizes, on the road by himself how much

he too misses his friend. 'Because there was no one to hear, he said aloud, 'fuck it, John G. Moore. I need you' (119). He comes into this realization, though he can not admit it to his friend, who is left in Ireland, extremely sad, at the verge of tears. He thinks he is going mad, and he blames it on schizophrenia. When Smallgoods comes back, or as he phrases it, returns to him, the reason of his depression is even clearer:

I couldn't describe to you how excited I was as I drove down. His return was going to make up for everything. I had visions of throwing myself around him in an embrace that would dissolve all the depression and all the madness; of him taking me for walks in the middle of the night so that I could tell him things that no one else would have listened to. (157)

This sort of speech is very close to that of a lover and reveals the nature of their feelings for each other. When they get together, John G. confesses to have written him forty-three letters, sixteen of them on the same day. We have already analysed Smallgoods' definition of love as self-delusion. But this remark hits John G. in his weak spot:

For some reason, hearing that remark from him hurt me. I had come to think of our friendship in terms of some sort of love. Like the way I had loved my father, it was perfect, because it didn't need over emotion or forced commitment. To hear Smallgoods deny the existence of love was like hearing of a death. (161)

This passage seems to describe the way in which a romantic friendship can be better than a conventional relationship, in terms of displays of affection and commitment. They are engaged in this intimate relation, but they do not experience sexual desire for each other, or at least they do not notice. John G. does, however, express a desire to be with Smallgoods forever, a commitment which is very rare in Ronan's fiction. They had planned a future together, since the beginning of the book: 'I thought you could buy the farm next door to ours and we could be neighbouring farmers till the day we die' (36). To which Smallgoods replies: 'Or I could wash dishes. It doesn't matter. If you get prosperous I'll come and live in your attic and write the definitive novel' (36). Nevertheless, while there is no stated sexual desire, there is certainly jealousy. One night Smallgoods goes off with some girl he meets at a bar and spends the night with her. John G. is unable to sleep that night: 'All that day the black depression that had haunted me in the summer was hovering nearby. The only thing that kept it at bay was anger. Then he came back in the evening with his dissolving smile' (163). When

they talk John G. realizes he is trying to punish him, although he can not fully understand why. Later that night, while talking to Smallgoods, he comes to a conclusion that leaves hardly any margin for doubts and which seems almost like the very definition of romantic friendship:

I think, for a long time now, I have been in love with you. I know you say that love doesn't exist, but there isn't another word for it. I looked for another word and I kept coming back to the word love. It doesn't mean that I'm another Damon Mulrahey or anything like that. Sex is peripheral. It wasn't sex that made me fall in love with Jean. I could be wrong. I might be repressing something. But I believe that. What I mean by love is something too extraordinary to have anything to do with sex. (164)

In this way, John G. asserts his love for his friend, a form of love that he separates from sex altogether, although he does have certain reservations about it, putting forward the possibility that he might be repressing something.

In *A Picnic in Eden*, another romantic friendship can be observed, but in this one sexual desire might not be as absent from the narrative as in the previous one. Adam and Dougie's close friendship is described at the beginning of the story through the light of reincarnation, as if they had met previously in some sort of other life, in order to justify such a relationship, such a degree of intimacy and of instant familiarity:

Although this may seem irrelevant, it occurs to me that it is a useful way to explain the recognition between people at their first meeting, when they are destined to become friends, or lovers, or enemies. It is possible chronologically that Dougie Millar first met Adam Parnell in this intermediate state, and not thirty-two years later. It would explain why, when they first saw each other as men, there was not only a certain amount of recognition, but a sort of disappointment in each other, as if they had know each other as airborne immortals, and were now faced with the sordid reality of a human on two legs and how, despite this, they fell into a familiarity that is not easy to reason away. (10)

Adam's relationship to Dougie relies on a degree of intimacy that neither of them is able to have with their respective wives. They are able to tell each other things that they are reluctant to admit to anyone else. After their first long conversation, Adam tells Dougie: 'I just didn't want you to know the effect you had on me, because I don't understand why you should have that effect. The things I say to you would make me feel naked if I said them to anyone else' (96-97). Later on he tells him: 'If you became a close friend of mine I would expect the sort of love from you that would rip you to

shreds' (p.108). His wife often accuses Adam many times of behaving as if he was in love with someone else.

Homoerotic sexual desire is more evident in this novel than in the previously discussed one, but not to such a degree that would make the reader consider it a gay relationship. Because this story involves a drunken kiss and the way the protagonists deal with it, the more it makes the concept of a romantic relationship distinct and entirely different from a relationship between two gay men. This kiss takes place after a ball, when Dougie is very drunk and Adam is attempting to take him home. It is interesting that the first escape Dougie finds to deal with his desire is violence, and he tries to strangle Adam Parnell as he is trying to get him inside the car (138). After that, he begins talking and referring to Adam as the man for him. When Adam gets him home, Dougie catches his head between his hands and kisses him. Adam still has time to consider the pros and cons of being kissed by a man. According to him, it has some advantages, for he 'didn't pussyfoot around the way a girl would' (138), and they were the same height so there was 'none of that uncomfortable bending over' (138), although he admits to have had a problem with the stubble.

After this, his wife asks Adam directly if he is having an affair with Dougie and if he is in love with him. Adam reflects upon this and reaches the conclusion that she is only trying to scare him and compromise his friendship by insinuating homosexuality. He does not think of himself as in love with any one, not even her, and expresses rather plainly his desire not to get involved with anyone else. He seems too burned out with his marriage to attempt any kind of relationship. He does, however, consider what really happened between him and Dougie and tries to account for the reasons that would have led Dougie to that kind of behaviour, also bearing in mind his potential guilt for having playfully flirted with him on various occasions:

It might just have been that he was checking me out, or it might have been an outrageous drunken joke. It might only have been affection. But I had been teasing him about falling in love with me, and I might have taken things too far. (142-143)

In this way, he decides to confront his friend, for there is only one answer that he can deal with. He asks him whether he has kissed him because he wanted to, or because it was something that Dougie would think that he, Adam, might have wanted. Dougie's reply is that he wanted to do it for himself, and that was the answer Adam could cope

with. Adam then reflects upon his attitude towards sex, and concludes in a rather plain way that he is not gay.

I had that lapsed Catholic attitude towards sex that saw anything vaguely sensual as intensely and intrinsically funny; while his mind worked in a much dourer way, and sex was something serious and silent, and strictly self-referential so that the other party had no say in the matter and no right to discuss it afterwards. Once I had worked all this out I was quite pleased not to be gay. Dougie Millar would have been an impossible lover. (146)

This passage is extremely significant for it accounts for Adam's view of homosexuality. In spite of his wife's accusations, he seems to be in no way affected by it, that is, it is very clear that this is not a case of hiding feelings out of fear of being or coming across as gay. He asserts that he is not gay, making the case for the concept of a romantic friendship as something other than a homosexual closeted relationship, but as something between a conventional friendship and a romantic relationship. Much like in *The Better Angel*, Adams tells Dougie that: 'What I always liked about you was that I got everything else from you except that nasty sex stuff. With Norah, sex seems to be the only thing we have left in common. That is no basis for a relationship' (146). From this outburst, it is apparent that the definition and the uniqueness of a romantic friendship lies in the fact that it is similar in all to a conventional love relationship, but it does not necessarily involve sex, which seems to be the basis for any conventional relationship, heterosexual or not.

After that I trusted him, not because I was sure that he wouldn't ever jump me again, but because I couldn't care less whether he did or not. And I think that might have been his idea when he stuffed his tongue down my throat in the first place. He was laying the ghost that haunts all men who are friendly with men. (146)

According to this thought, that kiss had thus little to do with sexual desire, and more to do with opening up the scope of possibilities in a male friendship, asserting its difference and setting it free from the conventional strict rules of male bonding. Adam's reaction to these unwritten rules and to the way people keep labelling as gay any kind of male friendship that seems to be closer than usual, is plainly stated on the following page. His wife is telling him of a couple who are having some trouble in their relationship. Adam's calm answer to this is, not surprisingly, that there is no such thing as a happy couple. His composure quickly changes as he realizes what the trouble is about. The wife

suspects her husband of being gay due to the fact that he receives letters from men that he does not want to show her. This conclusion drawn from so little evidence, plus the fact that his own wife keeps teasing him about Dougie, leads Adam to explode:

Why the fuck do you women do that? Why are you so afraid of men talking to each other? That isn't fair. You closet yourself in rooms with other women for hours and you keep each other's confidences and you weep all over each other and nobody suggests that there is anything odd about it. But as soon as a man talks to anyone except his wife he is either having an affair or he is a raving shirt-lifter. And it works. Most men are so terrified of that sort of thing being suggested that it works. Why don't you just buy us leads and collars and wee nametags? (147)

The point that he makes is extremely valid in this context. Homophobia limits same-sex friendships, particularly, although not exclusively, male friendships. In 'Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition', Dharmachari Jñanavira points out that:

Hence, in our cultural context where homosexual desire has for centuries been considered sinful, unnatural and a great evil, the experience of homoerotic desire can be very traumatic for some individuals and severely limit the potential for same-sex friendship. The Danish sociologist Henning Bech, for instance, writes of the anxiety which often accompanies developing intimacy between male friends: 'The more one has to assure oneself that one's relationship with another man is not homosexual, the more conscious one becomes that it might be, and the more necessary it becomes to protect oneself against it. The result is that friendship gradually becomes impossible.

According to this, any kind of more intimate friendship between two males, romantic or not, becomes impossible due to increasing homophobia and anxiety about labelling or the degree of sexuality that it might involve or appear to comprise.

This chapter, following the one on family ties, has sought to examine romantic friendships and the way they are presented throughout Frank Ronan's body of work. Given that many of Ronan's characters plainly state their disbelief in love or in the success of long-lasting relationships, several examples of relationships were taken into consideration and every one of them displayed motives other than love as a reason for being together. Examining their stories invariably led us to an unhappy or open ending. The word love is highly discredited throughout the narratives, and many of the characters that think of themselves as in love are ultimately proven to be wrong. According to



Ronan's work, love can not only be too much, or too less, but it can also be measured in terms of quality. To contrast with the above mentioned disastrous relationships or loveless arrangements, stories of romantic friendships were observed, exhibiting in Ronan a much greater degree of understanding and intimacy. Furthermore, at the end of the stories, the characters involved are still together and close friends, as opposed to fed up with each other, separated, or laying all their hopes on false assumptions, as happens with the other 'standard' relationships presented. The study of these friendships is highly significant, for it opens up the scope of romantic relationships, allowing for spaces between friendship and romance, heterosexuality and homosexuality to be taken into consideration, rather than ignored or forced into some other category. The men involved in these romantic friendships in Ronan's stories describe them in terms of getting from the other person all they would receive or could count on from a lover, without the element of sexual desire. However, as we have seen, this element is not entirely lacking, it is not displayed in a way or to such a degree that it is easy to dismiss it as plain homosexual desire. In a final note, the words of Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger on the subject, claiming that there is no such thing as any same sex friendship without some sort of sexual desire:

There is no friendship between men that has not an element of sexuality in it, however little accentuated it may be in the nature of the friendship, and however painful the idea of the sexual element would be. But it is enough to remember that there can be no friendship unless there has been some attraction to draw the men together. (47)



## **God Save the Queen: The Impact of Nationalism, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism**

‘I was with the IRA. Once. Even carried a gun for a while, about an hour, a day, a week. Is it making yeh hard? But never hurt anybody. Killing’s crazy. That’s why I came south, to get away from all that stupidity. Queers shouldn’t have hate. Ain’t we had enough of the war inside this war?’

Kelvin Beliele, ‘Love’s Sweet Sweet Song’

Irish lesbian and gay writing, in common with most Irish writing, evinces a connection and a preoccupation with politicised Irish nationalism. One could argue that Irish lesbians and gay men were not exactly excluded from the formulation of cultural revolution – quite the opposite, in fact. Quite close to the source of national pride and identity – the creation of an Irish republic – there also existed traces of lesbian and gay writing.

Éibhear Walshe. *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*

Taking the cue from these citations, politics is a recurrent theme in Irish writing. Even when it does not appear as a key theme in a given novel or essay, it often creeps into the prose. Walshe, along with Kathryn Conrad, Jonathan Dollimore, or David Norris, considers homosexual discourse in Ireland to be intertwined with political debate and specifically and deeply linked with the logic of colonisation and post-colonisation. The pertinence of gay and lesbian writing within the ethics of colonisation can be viewed in various ways, from its exclusion and absence from the discourse of a nation coming of age and therefore carefully shaping the image it means to divulge, to the attempts to incorporate itself into the literature of a country in need of widening its margins in order to emphasize Irish diversity and complexity as opposed to the unifying values of any strong nationalist discourse. Éibhear Walshe observes how gay discourse, as well as other forms of counter culture, can present a sort of threat to the literature of a country engaged in projecting a strong and powerful picture of itself:

In particular, the primacy of a particular form of masculinist nationalism in Irish writing led, inevitably, to the suppression of a number of counter-discourses (i.e. feminism, radical socialism, lesbianism, the homoerotic). In Ireland, where religious and judicial codes refused legitimacy and public space for same-sex desire, any lesbian or gay sensibility could only have existed in contradistinction to mainstream cultural discourse. (*Sex, Nation and Dissent*, 3)

In his book, Walshe sets out to argue that these discourses did exist despite marginalisation, although he makes the reasons for such a silence very clear, observing how lesbian and gay identity can be seen as ‘acutely threatening and unsettling within any post-colonial culture. For a nation coming of age, the lesbian and gay sensibility must be edited out, shut up’ (5).

However, as stated above, homosexuality was not only a setback to the purposes of post-colonial nationalism, for its history also bears the marks of colonisation. The Buggery Act was passed in England in 1533, criminalising sodomy. It had been an offence previously dealt with by the ecclesiastic courts, which would impose penances or sanctions depending on the social class of the accused party, but as Henry VIII became the Head of the Church of England and Church courts were no longer able to enforce laws, secular legislation was passed. The Buggery Act was one of the first anti-sodomy laws passed by any Germanic country, and the punishment for this crime was death. This law did not extend to Ireland right away. Bishop James Aperton successfully campaigned to have this law enforced in Ireland, although the course of events turned to be more than he had bargained for, according to Irish senator and civil rights campaigner David Norris, in an interview to *Outsmart*: ‘On Christmas Day 1640, having been found guilty of the abominable crime of buggery himself, he was hung by the neck until dead outside Christ Church Cathedral’. In this way, British colonisation brought on to gay Irish people a grim prospect, making homosexuality go from a sin to a crime punishable by death.

Only in 1861, under the 1861 Offences Against Persons act, was the punishment reduced to life imprisonment. The Labouchere Amendment of 1885 reduced this sentence to two years imprisonment, with or without forced labour, a sentence famously applied to Oscar Wilde in 1895. Nonetheless, this amendment was directed at those guilty of engaging in any act of ‘gross indecency’, which extended the scope of the accusation from sodomy to virtually any type of behaviour connected to male

homosexuality. The Oscar Wilde trial was responsible for the beginning of public debate on homosexuality.

The formation of the Irish Republic in 1922 did little to change this order of things. Despite the attempt to come across as a fresh, independent nation, and the animosity towards the British, this repressive legislation inherited from England was kept in the Irish Constitution of 1922. The 1960s saw a turmoil of political activism and civil rights struggle all over the world, but Irish legislation was unaffected. The escape from Irish homophobia was preferably achieved through emigration. The first gay rights activists started gathering in Ireland after Stonewall, which despite having taken place in America inspired activists to join the fight in many countries. Homosexuality was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1967 under the Sexual Offences act. In 1977 David Norris set out to challenge the constitutionality of such discriminatory laws in Ireland, but found the judges, although sympathetic to his cause, ruling in favour of the state. Taking the issue international, Norris appealed to the European Commission of Human Rights, but the Irish government contested their decision, which had favoured Norris' case. Homosexuality was finally decriminalised in the republic as late as 1993, later than in Scotland (1980) or even Northern Ireland (1982).

From this, it is easy to see why politics and the history of homosexuality can not easily be separated, given the particular effect that British colonisation had on gay people, (especially gay men, for lesbianism was not mentioned in the constitution). Furthermore, not only did colonisation mean criminalisation, their own constitution had also failed them once nationhood was achieved, so feelings of disappointment and frustration towards politics in their country and disenchanted views of Ireland surface often in gay Irish discourse.

In Frank Ronan's *Dixie Chicken*, for instance, there is a passage which reads:

She had assumed, like a lot of foreigners, that the easy-going surface of Irish society was indicative of social anarchy, and once she became aware of the rigidity of Ireland's social skeleton it was too late to change her behaviour, and she was too embittered to want to change it. (92)

From this, the critical tone is unmistakable. Firstly, there is the note which is very characteristic of Ronan, as we will have the opportunity to examine further in this chapter, about how a foreigner might view Ireland. According to him, one can quite easily misinterpret 'the easy-going surface of Irish society', only to find that reality is

rather different, underlining the harshness and strictness of the Irish social fabric. Kathryn Conrad also discusses the 'Irish social skeleton' by looking into the logic behind the preservation of the Irish family cell, as it regulates its own public image, hiding instability or blaming it on foreign influences:

It is a method of concealing any instability within the cell in order to present the image of control. If the cell is stable, so too are the social institutions built upon it, and one can present to the world one's capacity to rule. Instabilities must therefore be constructed and treated as foreign – not only to the family, not only to one's political position, but also to the nation as a whole. (*Locked in the Family Cell*, 10)

Thus, according to this passage, the strictness of the social fabric is also connected with the process of post-colonization and the need to project an image of control and capacity to rule. Many such examples can be found in *hOme*, where Coorg is always thought of as inadequate, causing a certain amount of shame to his family, which deals with it by attributing everything he does wrong to his English background. There is one particular passage in which all these feelings are extremely clearly portrayed:

When I think about it, there must have been a certain amount of consternation at 2 Mary Street upon the unexpected arrival of a child who was both a bastard and a pagan. Granny Scully must have been giving Willy and Bridey a hell of a time. If only I had known, I might have been able to take some pleasure in their discomfort, to relieve my own misery. The Scullys, however, were not a family to show weakness to an outsider and, although I was now a Scully in name, until I was trained in the reticence and conduct of a decent society I could not be considered an insider. (93)

Although this child is a part of the family and the son of an Irish mother, he will remain an outsider. According to Coorg, proper training in reserve and discretion, qualities Conrad associated with the Irish family cell, would be needed in order to transmit an image of control. Furthermore, the mention of the family's reluctance in demonstrating weakness in front of a stranger further proves Conrad's theory of how the Irish family chooses to deal with its issues internally. Another noteworthy point regarding this passage has to do with the fact that Coorg states that he cannot be regarded as an insider until he is trained in the conduct of a 'decent society', 'decent' surely as opposed to where he came from. In many instances of the book, explanations are given to him as to what makes Irish society so morally superior:

By winter the fort was back the way it should be, and you broke in by climbing the cliff and sliding between the bars of what was rumoured to be the Croppy Boys dungeon, from where you could sneak out on to the walls, which in the old days had been three times as high, and James II had leaped from the top of them on to the deck of a waiting ship hundreds of feet bellow, landing without a scratch and so proving the justice of the Catholic cause and the perfidy of the English, as if everyone didn't know that already from the way they had treated poor old Oliver Plunkett, for whom our school was named and on whose behalf we hated Titus Oates more than Cromwell himself. I worried sometimes that part of me was English and that that was the reason for all my failings. (133-134)

Again, it is quite obvious that the way things are told to the child make him feel not only like an outsider, but also that the outsider part of him is the part connected to 'perfidy' and 'failings'. An aspect that makes this passage so remarkable has to do with all the historical references included in it, combining reality with legend, facts with interpretations, although the reader is aware that Coorg's young mind is probably not able to make these distinctions.

The Croppy Boys were a group of Irish revolutionaries influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution, who were behind the rebellion of 1798, one of the most violent rebellions in Irish history, culminating in an estimated 15000 to 30000 deaths. This rebellion demanded that British rule should come to an end and that an Irish Republic should be founded, but the British army easily and bloodily crushed this uprising, being responsible for brutal massacres, which involved the most sadistic acts, such as burning the rebels alive, or rapes. One of the places in which these massacres took place was New Ross. This revolt caused England to strengthen its hold over Ireland through the Act of Union of 1801.

The reference to James II is highly inaccurate, which serves to clarify to what degree the way in which history is told carries moral and religious judgement and influences the mind of the children who learn it. The fact that James II lands safely after such an alleged perilous jump is used to assert the righteousness of the Catholic cause, which is opposed in this passage not to the word Protestant but to the word English. James II was, of course, English, but he was also a Catholic, which, according to the logic of Coorg's story, makes him therefore one of the 'good guys'. James' conversion to Catholicism had rendered a threat in the eyes of Protestant Englishmen, and he was therefore overthrown in the Glorious Revolution by his own nephew William, the Prince of Orange, with the help of a group of Protestant nobles, known as the Immortal Seven. James, deposed by the English Parliament, fled to France, where he gathered an

army. After this he came back to Ireland, whose Parliament still acknowledged him as the King, and where the Irish Catholics were counting on his help to try and reverse the Penal Laws, which oppressed the Catholic majority by restricting land ownership, and prohibiting the practice of their religion. Thus, Ireland had been turned into a battleground, the stage for a civil war which opposed James II, supported by Catholics, and William of Orange, assisted by the British and Irish Protestants. The struggle for the English, Irish and Scottish throne ended in the Battle of Boyne in 1690, where James II was defeated once again and the Penal Laws were re-applied with even greater austerity.

The death by hanging of Oliver Plunkett, the first new Irish saint (beatified in 1920 and canonised in 1975), also referred to by Coorg, and to an extent also the suspicion of James II's Catholic feelings, has to do with a 17<sup>th</sup> century Englishman Coorg was taught to hate called Titus Oates. Unlike Cromwell, however, Titus Oates is not the subject of divided opinion regarding his character or his role in history. In a 2006 BBC poll, Titus Oates was considered the 17<sup>th</sup> century's worst Briton in the BBC History Magazine, ranking third-equal worst Briton over the last 1000 years. He was an Anglican priest, dismissed from several places on charges of sodomy and drunken blasphemy. In 1678 he came to King Charles II, claiming to have evidence of a Catholic plot against Charles, aiming to murder him and replace the king with his Catholic brother James and then eliminate all other prominent Protestants. The king did not believe it but investigations were carried out, and anti-Catholic hysteria grew. He made allegations against Catholic and Jesuit members of religious orders, and as trials began, innocent men were killed at the slightest suspicion of being involved in the alleged Popish plot. Panic grew and everyone suspected of being a Catholic was driven out of London and forbidden to return. Finally, the innocence of the executed men started to be proven, and Oates was eventually sent to prison himself, although he was later pardoned. The last man to be hanged over this non-existent Popish plot was the Archbishop of Armagh, Oliver Plunkett. Plunkett was a well respected figure of Irish Catholicism. He had to stay away from Ireland after he had been ordained because, due to the ban on the practice of Catholicism, members of the clergy were being executed. He came back to Ireland in 1670, as the English Restoration had allowed for the Penal Laws to be less strict, and he built schools and worked to fight drunkenness among members of the clergy. As the scandal of the Popish plot broke out, he was persecuted, but refused to leave those who needed him. Therefore, he was arrested in Dublin and



taken to England, for had he been tried in Ireland, the chances were he would never have been convicted. The English Court found no evidence of his implication either, but he was not released and was re-tried in a Kangaroo court according to which he was accused of promoting the Catholic Faith and sentenced to death, becoming the last Catholic martyr to die in England.

Coorg's extremely biased version of the historic events is very illustrative of the way history was taught in the Ireland of the time, which makes sense in a post colonial context. In this way, Gaelic was made compulsory at school, and many of the schools were run by Catholic priests which caused history to be told not only from a highly nationalist perspective, but also from an extremely biased religious view. In Coorg's version it is plain the way nationalists were exalted and thought of as martyrs, while the other side is representative of the 'perfidy of the English'. It is as if Ronan was inviting his reader to reassess Coorg's words. It is noteworthy that the narrative takes place when it does, for at the same time Coorg is learning and absorbing such views on history, this was a subject which in the 1960s and early 1970s was beginning to be analyzed through a different lens. In the universities of Dublin at the time, an approach called historical revisionism started gaining importance and even becoming fashionable. It relied on the assumption that the way history had been told was not necessarily accurate and that it was time to revise and rewrite history according to the most recent economic and social changes and the idea was to free Irish history from the traditional nationalist myths. In his essay 'New Ways of Killing Your Father' (which is a review of one, if not the most, important Irish revisionist author Roy Foster's book *Paddy and Mr. Punch*) Colm Tóibín remembers the time when he was in college and the ways in which universities were working 'against the national grain, dealing with the complexities rather than the simplicities of Irish history'. Tóibín describes how the historians of the time started to be engaged in giving louder, more confident voices to Irish history, and driving the Irish away from 'ancient pities' and the victim culture:

They tried it on me. I went to University in College Dublin in 1972 to study History and English. If there was a forbidden 'f' word or is a forbidden 'c' word while we studied there, they were 'Fenian' and 'colonial'; all the Irish history we studied was parliamentary and constitutional. The 19th century was made up of O'Connell and Parnell, and there was much emphasis on their time at Westminster. Young Ireland, the Fenians, even the poor old Hand League were presented as non-constitutional headaches for O'Connell and Parnell. Michael Collins was a Treaty negotiator rather

than a warlord. Outside in the world there were car bombs and hunger strikes, done in the name of our nation, in the name of history. Inside we were cleansing history, concentrating on those aspects of our past which would make us good, worthy citizens who would keep the Irish 26 county state safe from the IRA and IRA fellow-travellers. ('New Ways of Killing Your Father')

In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd explains his feelings on revisionism, older and more recent, in a way which seems almost written with Coorg's words on the 'Catholic cause and the perfidy of the English' in mind: 'The aim of recent Irish historians has been worthy enough: to replace the old morality-tale of Holy Ireland versus Perfidious Albion with a less sentimental and simplified account' (642). Although he makes the case for the advantages of this kind of approach, he also considers the dangers of taking it too far, by removing 'a sense of linear causality' (642) which would, according to him, lead to the denying of fundamental questions such as why the English colonized and exploited Ireland. However, although Kiberd does not dismiss the main ideas or intentions behind revisionism, it is clear that he believes Irish revisionists did more than simply tell the story from the other side's point of view. He acknowledges some of the credits he thinks this approach deserves while pointing out the disadvantages:

By refusing to countenance a post-colonial analysis, they colluded – quite unconsciously, of course – with the widespread nationalist conceit of Irish exceptionality: the Irish experience was not to be compared with that of other peoples who sought to decolonize their minds or their territory. In exculpating the British, they certainly did justice to some persons who had been unfairly demonized by nationalist historians, but they also passed rather too swiftly over instances of imperial guilt; and, in the process, they invented some new demons of their own. Patrick Pearse, for example, was no longer to be treated as a plaster saint but as a vulgar egomaniac. (644)

A case in point for this is Ruth Dudley Edwards' *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (1977) in which she characterizes Pearse as a deluded romantic who had a craving for unnecessary revolutionary blood spilling and whose actions ended up glorifying war. She goes as far as implying that the people he died for was no more than an imaginary one. In Colm Tóibín's essay, he accounts for the reasons why such an approach to Irish history had seduced him and made him experience a 'huge feeling of liberation':

I was in my late teens and I already knew that what they had told me about God and sexuality wasn't true, but being an atheist or being gay in Ireland at that time seemed

easier to deal with as transgressions than the idea that you could cease believing in the Great Events of Irish nationalist history. No Cromwell as cruel monster, say; the executions after 1916 as understandable in the circumstances; 1798 as a small outbreak of rural tribalism; partition as inevitable. Imagine if Irish history were pure fiction, how free and happy we could be! It seemed at that time a most subversive idea, a new way of killing your father, starting from scratch, creating a new self. ('New Ways of Killing your Father')

In this passage, Tóibín clearly exposes the way religion and sexuality seemed easier aspects to transgress than any disbelief in the political discourse of nationalism. He describes feelings of happiness and freedom given the possibility of the Irish past being pure fiction, that freedom being derived from interpreting history as opposed to having opinions being fed to you since childhood. The first part of Tóibín's essay deals with how he came to sympathise with the revisionist view. He describes his connection with the pride of the 1798 Rising, accounting for the way Irish folklore songs had immortalized the names of the towns and villages around the place where he and his family are from, telling the story of battles and killings. However, it was not until he was in his twenties that he came across a place of which he learnt that the rebels burnt alive have a large number of Protestant men, women and children. He noticed that that was not in any of the songs and not even his father, who was a local historian, had ever brought it up or written about it.

The landscape of north Wexford, where I was born, is dotted with memorials to 1798, but there is nothing, as far as I know, at Scullabogue. Its memory was erased from what a child could learn about 1798. It was a complication in our glorious past, and it was essential for our past to be glorious if our present, in what Roy Foster in his new book of essays calls 'the disillusioned tranquillity of the Free State', was to have any meaning. This was what our ancestors fought for; we had it now; it had to be good. ('New Ways of Killing your Father')

There are other historians who strongly disapprove of such an approach to Irish history. One of these is novelist and historian Peter Berresford Ellis who, in his essay 'Revisionism in Irish Historical Writing: The New Anti-Nationalist School of Historians', as can be apparent from the very title, dubs the revisionists as anti-nationalists and accuses them of apologizing for and thus supporting British imperialism. Even Kiberd and Tóibín, the later more enthusiastic in the defence of this approach than the former, express reservations, doubts and mixed feelings about the revisionist perspective. Nonetheless, it is not hard, from the passage above, to understand the desire to re-examine the history one has been told, when one comes

across manipulated or missing parts of it. Tóibín implies that, just as we have seen in the chapter about homosexual literature, less convenient episodes of the Irish ‘glorious past’ were also being edited out, which would mean, that this past would be, as Tóibín puts it, ‘pure fiction’.

In a slightly similar line of reasoning, Kiberd dedicates the introduction of his *Inventing Ireland* to the search for the proper answer to the question of who invented Ireland. He comes up with three different hypotheses, the first of these being the Irish, ‘a truth suggested by those words Sinn Féin (ourselves)’ (1). He states that this movement ‘imagined the Irish community as an historic community, whose self-image was constructed long before the era of modern nationalism and the nation-state’ (1). The second answer he considers is the English: ‘[T]hrough many centuries, Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues, as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters’ (1). The third answer provided has to do with emigration, for as men and women fled to ‘the major cities of Britain, North America and Australia dreaming of a homeland’ (2), that dream of a homeland led to their becoming ‘committed to carrying a burden which few enough on native grounds still bothered to shoulder: *an idea of Ireland*’ (2). He concludes this subject by considering self invention, for which Kiberd takes on the works of Augusta Gregory, Yeats, Joyce, Synge and Elizabeth Bowen, demonstrating how the androgynous hero comes to represent the way in which ‘this generation of Irishmen and Irishwomen fathered and mothered themselves, reinventing parents in much the same way as they were reinventing the Irish past’ (6).

As far as Ronan’s fiction is concerned, emigration is a subject dealt with in ‘The Rower’, one of the short stories featured in *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt*. The story is about a teacher residing in Portugal who goes back to Ireland and visits his old school-teacher on her deathbed. The narrator refers to the family of his former teacher as ‘the only thread of life’ in his town, for the others have migrated, as well as himself:

‘There were times in the life of the town when Lily’s family seemed to be the only thread of life running through the place. Times when the state was young and, for want of an identity, De Valera was allowed to impose his ideal of the Irish as an innocent peasantry, by repression and censorship; times when the thugs of the Old IRA were allowed to swagger unchallenged, before the Provisionals made that acronym shameful. There were others, of course, with the courage to think for themselves, but, by and large, they went away: to fight in Spain, to live in Russia, to labour in North London, to teach Portuguese schoolchildren the English language in my own case. It was Lily’s

family who stayed behind and kept the thin-spun thread of the intellect running through our town. Perhaps there were others, but that is the family I know of.' ('The Rower' 62)

Included in the third chapter, 'Family Ties', there was a quote from *Inventing Ireland* which is extremely relevant for a close reading of this passage. It read: 'emigration had robbed` the community of potential innovators' (383). The above paragraph seems to be the perfect illustration of Kiberd's statement, for emigration had robbed The Rower of people who would be able to stimulate progress and intellectual innovation. Furthermore, Kiberd conveys that:

In Ireland, following a limited form of independence in 1922, the shutters came down on the liberationist project and the emigrant ships were filled not just with intellectuals but with thousands of young man and women. People began to emigrate not only from poverty or the hated law, but because the life facing them was tedious and mediocre. The revivalists had won: the fathers with their heroes and ghosts from the past. (*Inventing Ireland*, 393)

According to Kiberd, the way out of the crisis was to idealize and glorify ordinary mortals, such as Michael Collins, Charles Parnell or Eamon De Valera. 'That the nation is *not* being shaped', Kiberd asserts, 'is what this self-mythologizing is designed to occlude: this type of hero, confronted with each crisis of statecraft, can do little more than repeat the tale of his own apotheosis' (393). Concerning De Valera, Ronan's passage also characterises him as someone who filled a void at a time when 'the state was young' and in need of a national identity. Thus, according to the text, De Valera used repression and censorship to be able to impose in Ireland an idea of what it should become, his 'ideal of the Irish as an innocent peasantry'. This ideal that De Valera wanted to impress on Ireland, his vision of it is quite clear in his (characterized by Konrad in *Locked in the Family Cell* as '(in)famous' (24)) radio speech to the nation on St. Patrick's day 1943:

The Ireland which we have dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of a right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires men should live. (De Valera)

From this speech, it is easy to understand what the narrator from 'The Rower' means by 'ideal of the Irish as innocent peasantry'. He describes potential opposition to this ideal as 'others, with the courage to think for themselves', but states that these others, like he himself, had gone away. Another interesting point is that the narrator accuses the Provisional IRA of 'making that acronym shameful'. The Old IRA descended from the Irish Volunteers and was declared the official army of the Republic by Dáil Éireann in 1919. After 1921, the struggle shifted to Northern Ireland, but, with the growing violence in the 1960's some of its supporters were accusing it of failing to defend the Catholic minority in Ulster. The army then split to form the provisional IRA, in our time usually referred to as just the IRA. However, what is truly remarkable is that while the narrator accuses the Provisionals of bringing shame to the name of the IRA, he does describe the Old IRA in terms of 'thugs' who 'were allowed to swagger unchallenged'.

This ideal or idea of Ireland is a concern expressed at different times in the various novels, especially a foreign idea of Ireland. One example, already discussed in this chapter, is from *Dixie chicken*, when Rory's wife Helen, 'like a lot of foreigners', is said to have taken 'the easy-going surface of Irish society' for granted, unaware of the rigidity of its 'social skeleton' (92). Another example of such ideas or stereotypes about the Irish is present in the short story 'Doyle's Cross', which narrates a trip undertaken by newlyweds from Ireland to India in 1936. During the boat trip, the husband does not pay his Irish wife much attention and his sisters mock her accent and her 'Dublin-made dress' behind her back (45-46). She feels the need to do something about it, but she is afraid of the repercussions:

She wanted to laugh at the preposterousness of it, but she had heard the words mad and Irish too often in conjunction to want to fuel the stereotype with behaviour that would be irrational to her fellow passengers. (46)

However, the passage that is more in tune with the idea of Ireland as De Valera's 'innocent peasantry' and the myth of the tragic nationalist poet is the one in *A Picnic in Eden* that describes Dougie Millar's expectations towards Adam Parnell before he had met him: 'He had romantic ideas about the Irish and about poets and surnames like Parnell'(p.39). He set arranging the books on the shelves, considering the ones an Irish poet might like best, daydreaming about evenings of 'verse and nationalism' (39). When Dougie indeed met Adam, he was badly disappointed:

Having expected a sort of Brendan Behan, he found instead a perfectly sober man who spoke the same kind of colonial English as the Goodlands. And Adam was not at all soulful, but quite energetic, and smiled to himself all the time. And he looked nothing like any of the tragic likenesses of Charles Stewart Parnell. (43, 44)

Quite the same way that these stereotypes concerning the Irish are expressed in Ronan's fiction, one can also find the same logic applied to the English, for example in *The Better Angel*, when John G. visits Smallgoods family at their place and describes the mother:

The great goshes and good heavenses, and the way she addressed her children as darling, made her seem almost like an Englishwoman, but you could tell she wasn't English really, from the way she softened her double t's, and didn't wear a wristwatch, or smile all the time the way the English do. And her windows were dirty, but she wasn't a hippy, so she couldn't be English. (45)

Smallgoods Temple and his family are rather fascinating characters especially when the subject is politics for, as any frequent reader of Frank Ronan's work would by now be used to, they are extremely contradictory in what concerns stereotypes. As it has been established in other chapters, concerning other subjects, the stereotypes of Irish society are often expressed in the text, but also quite often, challenged. As to Smallgoods, he is obviously a troubled teenager who often rebels against authority, that of his family, his school and his church. The way he finds to revolt against these surroundings which somehow oppress him is to use what these people held dearest: nationalism and religion. He goes out of his way on several occasions to make sure he goes against the grain and shocks whoever he thinks might be standing in his way. The first of these is his refusal to speak Gaelic at school:

Everyone else mumbled, *Anseo*, when it was their turn, picking at their desks and pretending that the ceremony had nothing to do with them. But he called out, 'Here!' in a clear, abrasive voice.

The master said, 'We use the Gaelic here. *Anseo* will do.'

And Smallgoods Temple said, 'I prefer not to use it, if you don't mind terribly'. (8)

Later on in the story, he announces that he will not take Irish as a subject anymore, which amazes the other students for they had been told it was compulsory. However he tells them that he had found some sort of loophole, which serves to exemplify the way the students were being told that something was mandatory,

regardless of what was actually written on the regulations. When John G. finally goes up to the house he firstly encounters a child to whom he asks if that is Smallgods' house. At the realisation that he is a friend of Smallgods, the small child asks him if he is a protestant, to which he can only answer with another question, as to why. Her reply was: 'Oldgods said that Smallgods was only a bloody Protestant, and all his bloody friends were Protestants. He was nearly as mad as when I let the dog in and he did a shit on the sofa. That was after he told Father Apple he was an eegit and wouldn't go to Mass' (43). Oldgods is Smallgods' father and it becomes quite obvious to the reader that is really the cause of Smalgods' rebellion:

The car pulled up in the yard. A bearded man got out of it and came into the house. A minute later he came into the room we were sitting.

*'Dia dhaobh,'* he said.

He was tight-lipped under his beard, which covered a jaw even squarer than Smallgods'. There was a 'fáinne' in his lapel; that is: the badge by which Irish speakers recognise one another in the street.

Smallgods rolled his eyes to heaven at me, but so the man couldn't see. The muscles in his jaws were working like pistons. (47-48)

Clearly the only reason why Smallgods challenges language and religious faith is to try to get to his father. What is most remarkable about this situation is that Oldgods is not Irish, as Smallgods explains, he is English, although he does not allow his family to speak anything but Gaelic in his presence. Smallgods states that 'he has ideals about reviving the language that only a foreigner could entertain' (49). This is a very interesting point and both Toibin and Kiberd in their works discussed above complain that even though their country has long achieved independence they still rely on the foreign writing of their history.

Besides his insistence on the Irish language, Oldgods also seems to loathe the Protestants:

You remember, the last day I was in school, that I told them I was giving up Irish? Oldgods didn't take it too well when I told him. I suppose I shouldn't have told him in English. But I told him that I wasn't speaking Irish again, ever. The final straw was on the Sunday after Mass, when I argued with the parish priest about religion. It was quite a friendly argument, but Oldgods said afterwards that I insulted him, and had to apologise before I went to Mass again. So I said that was fine by me, since I had no intention of ever going to Mass again with an idiot like Father Apple supervising the proceedings. Anyway, he said that he couldn't have a heathen and a Protestant living in his house and giving a bad example to the children, so I took him at his word and hitch-



hiked to Italy. It only took two days. It was a good time to be there. The mountains aren't far away. (49)

Within that same conversation we are also to learn that to get Smallgoods to come back home, his father and him reached the compromise that Smallgoods is to address him in Italian or French, which would mean that not only is Oldgoods concerned about reviving Gaelic, as he seems to want to renounce his own language. Ultimately, later on in the narrative, as a final confrontation, Smallgoods decides to join the British Army.

Another relevant moment in *The Better Angel* has again to do with blind nationalism. One day at school, Smallgoods and John G. come across another student engaged in a sort of political graffiti on the blackboard: 'Because that was about the time of the dirty protests at Long Kesh, the drawing was, predictably, of an angry fist crushing an H-shaped Union Jack, with 'SMASH THE H BLOCKS NOW!' written beneath it' (21). Long Kesh was a Northern Ireland prison where, in 1981, ten men took on a hunger strike that culminated in death, in the name of human rights and in order to achieve the status of political prisoners. Other kinds of protests had been taking place at that prison facility for five years, for the IRA and INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) prisoners had not been given political status and refused to be labelled or treated as criminals, given that, the way they saw it, they were merely attempting to defend their homeland from foreign invasion. Among the rights that they demanded were the right not to wear a prison uniform, the right of free association with other republican political prisoners, and the right not to perform prison work. During these five years, the British government did not give in, so, ten of these men embarked on a deadly hunger strike, which did not cause immediate results, but created such an uproar that months afterwards the English government did agree on granting the political status.

Back to *The Better Angel*, the boy drawing on the blackboard did not seem particularly informed on this subject. It is as if he dreams of becoming a 'freedom fighter' (21) not because he believes or fully understands, but rather because this is what he sees other people doing, which makes for a pretty mordant social commentary:

He had a banner at home which he was going to paint with the same logo, for carrying through the streets of Dublin in the marches. It expressed for him what was wrong with the world and his solution. He was someone who was so intense that he hardly ever spoke (or washed), and when he did say something it was through clenched teeth, the way he thought a freedom fighter would speak. (21)

Smallgoods has to let him know that he has been drawing the Union Jack wrong, but he does not seem to mind, replying that it is only the British flag. At this point, Smallgoods, who so far appeared not to share any nationalistic feeling at all, quickly retorts: 'My point exactly. It isn't. It isn't the British flag at all. There is no cross of St Patrick. If your intention is to crush the Union, that flag defeats your purpose' (22)

The issue of nationalism is also dealt with in another novel, but in the Scottish context. Adam Parnell is an Irishman who lives in England, but spends his vacations in Scotland and it's there that he realises his true feelings on nationalism and colonialism. Although he admits that he was never political, and that he has never taken any interest in republicanism back in Ireland, the fact that the country he is in at the moment is not yet independent is something that makes think that his lack of political concern might be just a matter of one not being able to appreciate certain things while one still has them:

It gets under my skin that the English are still in charge here. It is only now that I can see what independence was all about. The English are a wonderful people; don't get me wrong. I make a good living there doing something I could never have got away with in Ireland; but while I am here I just keep thinking that the people in this country are too intelligent to be ruled by them. (47).

To this opinion, his friend, Dougie Millar adds that 'Anyone with a pair of eyes and a brain is a nationalist' (47). Another quite sharp social commentary on this subject comes precisely through the voice of Dougie Millar when he tells Adam of the time he spent working for the Ministry of Defence during the Falklands War. 'Maybe I should say the Malvinas war now, so there's no doubt about my sympathies on that one' (94) explains Dougie. He was the leader of a torpedo-inspection team and the torpedo that hit Belgrano (the ship that was sunk by the British in 1982, causing over half of the deaths related to the Falklands conflict) was the same kind of the ones his team worked with:

It wasn't necessarily one of ours, but they were celebrating the possibility that it might have been. I couldn't believe it. Men were going around with big smiles on their faces and slapping each other on the back. These were supposed to be Scotsmen; celebrating because they had helped the English prime minister to kill a lot of Argentinians and bolster her opinion-poll ratings. I felt sick about it. I'd never even met an Argentinian. Up until then I had inspecting torpedoes without thinking about them being used, but if I did, I assumed that they were supposed to stop a Russian invasion or something. It was supposed to be the Ministry of *Defence*. I never thought

that they'd be used so that three sheep farmers in the middle of the Atlantic could be saved a technical irregularity on their passports. The people I worked with were drunk on their victory, but I was back with the silence and the vacant stares. (94-95)

Dougie is not the only character in the narrative engaged in social critique. At one point, Adam is invited to a Ball during his vacation in Scotland and he describes what he sees in terms of 'thousands of upper-class colonialists pretending to be Scottish, and fat Scottish businessmen pretending to be upper-class colonialists' (135). All the pretending and bragging and started to annoy him to the point of:

Whenever anyone began a conversation with me, I asked them straight away how they felt about nationalism, and half of them hardly knew what the word meant, and the other half went away after I had expressed the view that the only good thing about the word queen was that it rhymed with guillotine. (135)



Another political concern that seems to transpire in Ronan's fiction is that of discrimination. There are various different instances in the narratives in which such a concern is expressed, as well of different types of discrimination. For example, *hOme* features an example of class discrimination in Ireland in the person of Grandma Scully. She criticizes everything her daughter-in-law ever does and one Christmas she does explain why: 'I suppose the people down the street are all saying it's my fault I didn't rear you to know better than to marry outside your class or warn you what might happen once the wrong class of woman got her hooks into you' (177).

But class discrimination is not the only kind of prejudice that Grandma Scully exhibits. Another sort she shares with her own daughter-in-law is racism. The old woman literally has a stroke when her granddaughter Brenda shows up at the house with Ash, who is from India. PJ, Brenda's brother, cannot stop himself from making jokes about Brenda being 'run out of the country for polluting her race' (142). Brenda's mother Bridey displays incredible moments of prejudice and ignorance. She keeps saying that 'they don't have toilets in Africa' (146), even though Ash is from India and lived in England most of his life. Furthermore, she adds that: 'They should never have let them in. We shouldn't be leaving them in here. The country's poor enough as it is without the likes of that fella taking the dole and the council houses' (146). She starts

getting worried that a 'dirty black man' (148) might have picked the fruit she is about to eat, and she panics when Ash makes for the front door, and she makes him go out through the back.

*A Picnic in Eden* also features reflections on racism, when Dougie tells of his friend Ben who is black and who was his only friend, given that Dougie himself was being discriminated and subjected to violence on the grounds of his English accent:

Ben was the only friend I had at the time, because he was black and no one would talk to either of us. I've heard people say that there was never racism in Scotland, but I can only think that those people have never been down the Maryhill Road. Ben had a worse time than I ever did, but while I could change my accent or shut up, there was nothing he could do about his colour (84).

At the risk of sounding like it was mandatory, one cannot help to notice the lack of references towards homophobia or any kind of prejudice against homosexuals. Again, it is not as though it is compulsory for an author who is gay, or writes gay fiction, or fiction which features gay characters, to write about intolerance or homophobia. However, according to the reality of the world we live in, it is hard to depict an open homosexual relationship which has never suffered the sting of some people's unfairness. The first time I read *Lovely*, I wondered if that was not intentional, if the author had not deliberately chose not to deal with such a subject, in order to avoid victimizing literature. Given that a lot of geographical detail was being given during Nick and Aaron's holiday and none as to where they actually live or most of the action takes place, I assumed that the reader was to be taken to some kind of utopic country where such questions would not be an issue, so that the writer could concentrate on the plot and not in raising sympathy, and could be able to worry about the characters in the novels as individuals and not as icons.

Researching for this dissertation made me even more certain about the difficulties of being a homosexual person or engaged in a homosexual relationship in Ireland, by reading many collections of stories or accounts of such situations, given the degree of influence of the Catholic Church and the way that post-colonialism often makes people relate anything they disapprove of with the occupying country, and hide what they consider to be weaknesses. However, the introduction to Brian Finnegan's *Quare Fellas* featured a passage which dealt with Ireland's relationship with the homoerotic, only focusing on its specificities:

It's probably the Irish propensity for sweeping problems under the carpet that allowed this to happen: because of our colonisation we have learnt to look at ourselves through other people's eyes, and it is human nature to smooth over our inconsistencies for other people. The difference between other Church-driven countries, in terms of homosexuality, has been the difference between active persecution of gay men and lesbians, and oppression through the simple denial of their existence. (7)

This passage had me re-thinking *Lovely* again. Was it a matter of turning the tables on that concept of denial and writing novels in which lack of tolerance was not a main or even an issue? Could that omission in itself be a form of protest?

Another essay that got me pondering about this subject was Queer Studies professor David Halperin's 'Pal o' Me Heart', in which he reflects upon Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*. The following segment addresses the issue of happy endings, for Halperin seems to be disappointed with O'Neill's use of 'the tragedy of teenage romances' whereas he should have, according to Halperin, concentrate on adult sexuality. Thus, he writes, drawing on the fact that E.M Foster dedicated Maurice to 'a happier year':

The suicides are now gone from queer fiction, for the most part, but the happy endings that Forster insisted on, and that gay liberation promised, still elude us. And for good reason: gay life in the real world is not all fun and games. But if the liberated vision of the best gay novelists does not produce happy endings, neither does it situate all our hopes for a happier year in some distant dream of a promised land or refuse to imagine a future for gay lovers this side of the grave. O'Neill's boys are so pure and heroic that they have nowhere else to go. ('Pal o' Me Heart')

However, the description of a 'happier year in some distant dream of a promised land' did not seem to fit my considerations of *Lovely* as much as I thought it would. I felt as if there was more to it than I was being able to grasp.

*At Swim, Two Boys* sees homosexuality as part of an Irish identity, comparing the two kinds of community, or nation building. On a different note, Kathryn Conrad contends that this is a part that most of the Irish have trouble with, especially in what concerns nationalism and colonialism. She asserts that homosexuality 'does not fit neatly with the discourse of the bourgeois nationalism' (Locked in the Family Cell, 21), and when it does enter the discourse of nationalism, it 'does so as a sign of foreign corruption and disintegration' (22). It makes sense that in a nation that is in need of projecting a strong, secure image, homosexuality is seen as an instability, as a moral weakness that must therefore be hidden or somehow pinned or blamed on whichever

political other's image that state is attempting to damage. Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has been quoted to assert that homosexuality was introduced to Africa via colonisation: 'Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves, out of Zimbabwe. We don't want these practices here. Let them be gay in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. They (gays) shall be sad people here'. By blaming everything that appears to be inappropriate of native values on western civilization and by trying to deny all that can be regarded as 'European vices', the idea within this context is to strengthen an essentialist notion of pride and nationalistic identity. The same way in this case, the notion of homosexuality as a foreign import is attributed to American colonisation, Amy Lind and Jessica Share in their essay 'Queering Development: Institutionalized Heterosexuality in Development Theory, Practice and Politics in Latin America' plainly show how gay or lesbian identity in Latin America is seen as a product of capitalism and therefore, a treason. In Ireland's case, of course, the target would be the British, and examples of that line of reasoning can also be found in *At Swim, Two Boys*. Anthony MacMurrough is a gay Irish man who has been previously arrested in England for gross indecency. His aunt, a fervent nationalist who believes that 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity' (p.31), desperately tries to convince her nephew to settle down and marry. When he reminds her of his past history, she dismisses it: 'I'm afraid they have coarsened you' (p.194). He insists, but she continues to call it a 'contretemps' (194), on the grounds that she means to claim that he had been framed by the English, who have coarsened and made a braggart out of him.

At this point, I re-read all of Ronan's novels and short stories looking for clues. In *hOme*, one can notice various references to sexual freedom and homosexuality, including a gay hippy community: 'he lived in a commune in Hampshire, which was entirely male and when the only rule was that every member had to go to bed with a different member each time' (28). All references made to sexual transgressions were set in England and none whatsoever in Ireland, but this could not be it. In *Dixie Chicken*, Rory, living in Dublin, goes to bed with his best friend. And that was when I realized what I had been looking for. Rory does go to bed with his best friend but this is in no way the depiction of an open gay relationship. There are references to gay men living in Ireland, and even gay sex, in this case. However, not a single open gay relationship is depicted on Irish soil. In the novels, the only one that deals with such a relationship is *Lovely*, which we don't have any clues as to where it is set. As for the short-stories, as

we have seen, there are gay characters or gay concerns set in Ireland, but let us look closer at the ones which display descriptions of an openly gay couple living together. 'After the Conquering Hero' does not feature any geographical information although it does appear to be set in the United States, given that Olivia celebrates VE night (101), and sings a hymn 'about the coming of the conquering hero' (102), which seems to be a reference to American actor and singer James Darren's song 'Hail to the conquering hero'. However, it does not feature any geographical reference. Olivia goes to live with her nephew, who lives with another man. Although there isn't either an explicit homosexual label to their behaviour, but the fact that their names are George and Michael cannot go unnoticed. Another story about gay relationships is 'The Sticky Carpet' which, does not offer any geographical information at all. 'Duck in a Red Cabbage' is set in Brixton, England, and the last stories, the 'The Last innocence of Simeon' series follows Simeon throughout three distinct periods of his life. Firstly, in Ireland, when he works for an old woman who seems to have picked on his homosexuality before he did. At that point he is dating a girl, but the old woman will not let him be and advises him to go and 'find a place where you're not afraid to talk about things' (163). She sets money aside, hoping that he will leave Ireland searching for a place where he will not have to hide who he is, the way her husband always did, causing her to feel so strongly about Simeon's situation. 'There will,' she says, 'be, one day, a happy member of this species who is still in possession of his sanity'. The second story with the same name does not, once again, offer us geographical information. One can tell that Simeon seems to be on vacation, for he is in a *château*, and tired from 'a long drive' (187). At this point in time, Simeon is married for eight years and has two children. This undisclosed location is the setting for his very first homosexual experience. However, it is not until the last homonymous story that we can see Simeon living alone, waking up with another man, finally assuming who he is and what he wants to do. We learn that he is divorced from his wife and that he had had at least one long affair with a man. This time the reader is told where the action takes place, and it is not Ireland but the United States ('Irishman abroad. It has to be navy or novelist, doesn't it?') (208). About Ireland, the old lady from the first Simeon story had said: 'But the times are different now. And if you go away you'll find there's nothing wrong with what you are; it's only this place and others like it' (165). Judging from this, looks like Forster's happier year might still have to wait a while.



To sum up, this chapter has sought to analyse the political references in Ronan's novels and short stories, which are numerous, and from different angles or points of view. However, a slight feeling of dishearten with Irish politics prevails, which might easily be understood through reflecting on the way that the history of homosexuality is deeply connected to the developments staged in the Republic of Ireland. Not only does gay discourse suffer from being thought of as undesirable in terms of the construction of a strong nationalist and counter-colonialist logic, but also it was through the British colonialism that homosexuality went from condemned by the Church to convicted with the death penalty by the courts of law.

In this line of thought, passages from the novels were considered in which the strictness of the Irish social fabric was openly criticized, highlighting the difficulty that one who has trouble understanding the necessary moral code to fit in would have, and how social discourse is structured in order to make sure these people who do not correspond to the norm are considered outsiders. This was followed by an analysis of the way history was taught to the central character in *hOme*, Coorg, and by an evaluation of the revisionist approach to Irish history. Also examined were ideas of Ireland as seen by foreigners and of the ideal Ireland, expressed throughout Ronan's fiction as well as some of his character's less enlightened views of the English people. To conclude, displays of social discrimination were explored, ending with a questioning as to why open homosexual relationships in Ronan's fiction are never depicted on Irish soil, but set instead, in India, England, the United States, or some kind of utopian free land, where problems of prejudice or intolerance are left out.



## 6

### **Suffragette City: Images of Femininity**

Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male.

Simone de Beauvoir

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of female characters and the way they are portrayed in the different novels which comprise Frank Ronan's body of work. Given that most of Ronan's protagonists are male, the conflicts inside women characters are often left unresolved and insights regarding their psychological density and complexity are rarer.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote in her extended essay *A Room of One's Own* that: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man twice its natural size' (35). Most of the female characters in Frank Ronan are just that: looking glasses, through which one can have a better look at male characters, and their characterization in the narratives serves little more than that purpose. In *A Picnic in Eden*, for instance, there is one male leading character, two if we choose to count Dougie Millar, but we know of Adam's wife's crises, problems, desires and tribulations only insofar as they affect him. Her character's function in the narrative seems to be little more than to provide him with stability at first, and then as a contrast to his personality, with her desire of having a child, and her need for displays of affection that he seems unable to provide. It is through the complaints of his wife that the reader becomes aware of his seeming coldness, but a reader is largely unable to say that they have got to know anything about the character, or the way in which she functions.

*The Better Angel* also features two male protagonists, and so does *Lovely. Dixie Chicken* is the story of Rory Dixon's life and death, as narrated by God, and *hOme* deals

with the childhood of a little boy. *The Men who Loved Evelyn Cotton* is in fact about the story and the life of a woman, but a careful analysis of the title should show that the story of her life is told in relation to the men who have shared it, and narrated by one who wished he could have shared it in a more intimate and prominent way. As for the short stories in *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt*, the great majority of them also display leading male characters. Old women in these stories are the only ones characterized as strong, wise and independent, often in terms of knowledge or advice to pass on to the troubled leading characters. Younger girls, in the stories, as well as the novels, are portrayed in relation to the other men in the stories, either as bitter, jealous women (Helen in 'Kilbride', as well as Helen in *Dixie Chicken*, Cathy in *Lovely*), dependant on their husbands (Eileen on 'Doyle's Cross') or in some way abusive, dismissive or pushy towards their companions or family (Josy in 'Salthill', Miriam in 'Ringsend', like Emir in *The Men who Loved Evelyn Cotton*).

To sum up, most of the women in the novels and stories seem to be there serving as a background for a better comprehension of the plot or the other characters, and the reader is left with little information about other traits of their personality. This chapter is thus devoted to a more comprehensive study of the images of femininity displayed in the novels, by analysing the most important female characters in a more detailed way, so as to unveil their function in the narratives, towards a better understanding of the gender stereotypes that they represent or subvert. The focus of such analysis is, therefore, placed mainly upon female characters who proved to be an exception to the aforementioned looking-glass function in the novels.

In order to examine the way femininity is represented, it is best to begin by looking at the clear depiction of Coorg's two aunts in *hOme*, Netty and Sally. The two girls are highly repressed by their strict mother, and they never married but the difference between them in terms of how they are described is blatant, and by contrast Netty's conventional femininity is even more highlighted when presented side by side with her sister. Netty appears as a fragile woman, 'tiny and sprigged with floral patterns and diminutive movements' (90). She listens to the radio all the time, and takes care of the house, her daily routine consisting of cooking, cleaning, and polishing the furniture. Her sister Sally is described as her opposite, as a big, butch woman, with the voice of a man and 'bottle-end spectacles that gave her monster eyes' (90).

Journalist and radical feminist Susan Brownmiller, in the prologue to *Femininity* (1984), describes femininity as, 'a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed

limitations' (14). In this line of thought, the set of characteristics that one traditionally attributes to femininity, are without a doubt, the ones any reader can observe in Netty, 'the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict – in short, an appeal of dependence and good will that gives the masculine principle its romantic validity its admiring applause' (*Femininity*,16). What is remarkable about this, is that this characterization is not set to contrast with any male, but with her own sister.

By the time Coorg has a baby sister, his two aunts attend the christening, only because their mother is in the hospital and therefore unable to forbid them to go. They both get excited and moved upon seeing the small child but their maternal instinct is illustrated in very different ways: 'Netty was twitching and twittering with excitement. Sally stared down silently from a broken face, breathing in snorts like a maternal pachyderm, while Netty made enough noise for the both of them' (162). It is almost like a beauty and the beast kind of image, although there is no reward of any kind under the attentive look of their severe mother and the harsh gaze of the Irish Catholic Church and social rigidity.

Sally appears to be self-conscious about the way she looks, for when faced with a question regarding marriage, just the thought of herself in a wedding dress carrying flowers makes her feel ridiculous:

I never met a man was worth the bother of putting on a big frock and everyone lookin' at you. Could you imagine me walking down the aisle of the parish church and a big bunch of flowers? They'd all be laughing. (210)

The reader is almost driven to empathize more with Netty, although Sally is also described as a good person, making the kids tremble 'by the tone in which she asked them what they wanted, before giving them twice as many sweets as their money warranted' (90). However, Netty is the one always cheering for our protagonist, and leading a rather empty life with which she always seems delighted. She comes across almost as if larger-than-life, with her frailty, and her happiness, and her flower dresses. It seems rather ironic, when she grabs Coorg for 'a muted dance lesson whenever Andy Williams came on the radio to sing that she was just too good to be true' (90). In fact, just like the song, she does seem too good to be true, she's like the traditional, unattainable vision of ideal femininity. As any vision fades away, as any ideal of perfection never lasts, Netty is the only character in the book to die.

In *hOme*, however, there is another female character that offers a much more complex interpretation of the concept of femininity, and she is also one of the few people in the story who has played a very influential part in Coorg's life in the most positive way. Unlike Netty, Debora's character is not constructed in a delicate and almost ethereal way; she is rather earthy and not always in the best of moods, which humanizes and makes her easier to identify with. She does stand out within the community, not according to any traditional ideal of femininity, but due to the fact that she actually thinks and uses her practical sense. The fact that she is the only one who cooks decently, feeds and worries about the child (and the cat) is not presented to the reader as related to any stereotype of feminine characteristics, but as the only practical and reasonable thing to do. Her concern for the welfare of Coorg does not seem to derive from any frustrated desire to be a mother or from some kind of innate maternal instinct that any woman is supposed to possess, it is simply a matter of being the only one in complete possession of her sanity, not caught up in the carefree mentality and alleged spirituality of the place. It is in this manner that she stands out from the rest of the people who live there, and her sense of responsibility does not confine itself to the community. While the others are always wrapped up in talk of revolution through music, but are obviously too self-absorbed to become aware of anything else going in the world outside the community and an occasional rock concert nearby, Debora travels to Paris to be a part of what one can easily assume to be the happenings of May 1968, a student strike demanding better education and fighting for sexual freedom. This revolution can claim to have changed the course of history, not only for having inspired other student rebellions all over the world but also for having helped to overthrow a repressive and media censorship based government in a way, for this rebellion made the French change political course in the following elections. As opposed to Debora's involvement in what it is fair to call a real revolution, there is only the community's preaching of a spirituality in which not even they actually believe, and the pontificating defending of a lifestyle that they constantly cheat on and change the rules of for their own convenience. At one point in the story, after having returned from Paris, she thinks to herself that she probably does not belong there (34).

Another way in which Debora comes across as different from everybody else living in the community is in terms of her sexuality. The reader never becomes aware of her reasons, but the fact is that she does not seem interested in benefiting from the community's teachings of free love. During one summer in which Coorg notices more

romantic activity going on than before, he realizes that ‘only me and Debora remained aloof’ (44). When he asks about what is different that particular summer, and whether that is the summer of love, she enigmatically responds ‘depends on what you call love’ (44). The word enigmatically was used in this context, for the reader has no further clue about what to make of this - whether she is referring to a difference between the concept of sex and the notion of love, or if she disapproves of such careless connections, or anything else. She is very vague as to why she chooses not to be a part of it, although she reassures Coorg that that is a natural thing and that he should not convince himself that there is anything wrong with it. Regarding herself, she says only that: ‘Because I’m no good at doing things the same time as everyone else. I either want to do it too soon or after they’ve all finished’ (44). Again, this statement is unclear and ambiguous, but what remains unmistakable is that Debora is different. Such difference is also felt within the community, especially by Julian, the leader, with whom she finds herself constantly in disagreement. He deals with her defiance by implying she is or calling her a lesbian, or rather ‘a fucking dyke’ (33). Whether this is true or not is not clear to the reader. Julian might be calling her a lesbian out of spite, suspicion or actual knowledge. The only information the reader is given is that:

Debora and Bronwen arrived together and shared a room, despite the palpable dislike that fizzled between them. They rarely spoke to each other in public, but voices could be heard coming from their room late into the night, where a well-thumbed copy of Mary Wollstonecraft topped the pile on the bedside table. Bronwen was an enthusiastic member of the company, thrilled by every new rule and prohibition, while Debora disapproved of so much that the mystery of her remaining with us was often discussed, though never in her presence (16).

The fact that they arrived together and that Debora’s presence in the community remains unexplained is hardly conclusive evidence of homosexuality, and neither is the classic feminist book on the bedside table. Thus, Julian’s accusations tend to sound more like a reaction to her questioning of his leadership, or even revenge for her not sleeping with him, for homosexuality does not present a problem within the community and therefore it would not make sense to call someone a dyke in such a pejorative way, or dismissing her criticism as ‘dried-up men hating lesbian crap’ (32).

Women’s sexuality is discussed in another novel, *The Better Angel*, although in a completely distinct way, tone and approach. Elsa, the girl who falls in love with Godfrey Temple, seems to be a representative character. I hesitate to use the word

stereotype, but Elsa's contribution to the narrative is only through her story and her relationship towards sexuality, the story of probably many women in rural Ireland in the past and in the present, and also, her role in demonstrating Godfrey Temple's lack of inclination for love.

The character of Elsa appears in the book only in its second part. She is the housekeeper for Father Mulrahey, for whom she has great respect, and begins a timid affair with Godfrey, who is staying with him. Right from the second page, the reader becomes aware of the fact that he does not love her, and that he tells her so only because he cannot think of a better answer. Another thing the reader realises is how uneasy Elsa feels about sex, for she had been abused by her father, and fell into a loveless marriage in which the intimacy for her is no different from what she went through with her father. 'She thought, at the age of twenty-two, that it was time she did something for her own pleasure, and not the appeasement of someone else' (80). Shortly after her affair with Godfrey had begun, she made the decision to leave her husband, a resolution that was hastened by a sexual attempt by her husband. Her husband Jack Ponder seems to have been turned on by her nervousness, and, moreover, by her refusal: 'he always wanted to do it when she was upset. As if her weakness turned him on in some way.' (83).

Clearly, Elsa is a gullible person. She is certain that Father Mulrahey is able to 'see her sin' (83), and she also believes in Temple's pillow-talk. However, her affair gave her the strength to leave her husband, even though it was based on the false premise that she was falling in love with someone who was also falling in love with her. As the romance unfolds along with her story, the more she tells of her life the more it becomes impossible not to be certain that Godfrey's motives to move in with her are driven only by pity. Also, for her part, she tells him that she is with him because he is the only man who hasn't hurt her.

Towards the end of the narrative, her fate does not become any more hopeful, and she turns out to become a single mother. The way the narrative is told leads us to believe that she probably understood Godfrey's motives for being with her and chose not to bother him or become a burden to him, by choosing to hide her pregnancy and going away, but it is also possible that that was a mutual decision that Temple simply preferred not to share with John G., for Elsa tells him that she sent Godfrey about fifty letters on the subject to be forward to him in Australia, but she never got an answer. When John G. confronts him with it, it is clear that he does know about it, although we still do not know the terms of their separation.

Elsa's unhappiness is not unique in the story. All the other female characters suffer from the same fate: Godfrey Temple's mother was forced to marry someone other than the man she loved, John G's mother became mad, and John's aunt Dervla was destined to take care of her sister's children until they grew up, preventing her from marrying and having children of her own. However, Dervla manages to be the only female character with the ability to change her own fate and make the right decisions.

Before having to take over her sister's role, Dervla had been studying at Trinity College in Dublin, and was involved with a man called Mark O'Brien. When her sister got sick and passed away, she had to give up on both of her passions and replace her sister in her family household, looking after a man who was not her husband, and taking care of children who were not her children. By the time Mark O'Brien turns up again in her life, her nephews are already grown men and she is able to fantasize about a life of her own. Mark's wife had recently died, as Dervla had been secretly desiring for seventeen years, 'the one evil thought she allowed herself, and the one sin she had never confessed' (110). She wrote him a condolence letter, he answered and they arranged to get together. As soon as she saw him, she felt as if something was wrong, although this feeling was accompanied by one of relief:

Once she had realised, standing by the back door, that this was not the man she had been in love with, she felt at ease with herself. She had no longer anger or passion to vent on the man who came towards her, picking his way across the yard like a townsman who is afraid of the mud. (111)

At this point, lack of passion is not new in Frank Ronan's writing, but Dervla seems to be thankful that this is the case. It is not difficult for her to understand what his intentions are, as he is clearly looking for a new wife and for someone to take care of his children. For someone who had dreamed of him for so many years, it does not take long to feel offended by such a passionless, practical plan. Even though Dervla wanted a life of her own, this arrangement does not appear to be satisfactory in any way, for this new prospect does not seem to be much different from her current situation:

He said that the children missed having their mother around. Dervla was almost insulted by that. She wanted to tell him that she spent half her life already looking after other people's children; she wanted to tell him about her hysterectomy; tell him that if she couldn't have children of her own it was an offence to her that it was assumed she was available to bring up every orphan in the country. (111)

She did not utter these things, however, for at that time she was not completely sure if she was determined to decline such an offer. She stood there, thinking it over, and in a couple of minutes, she had almost made up her mind to marry Mark, or rather, 'she had almost decided to allow Mark O'Brien to marry her' (112). This is an interesting take on marriage, and also on the women's role in such arrangements and society. Dervla had spent her life looking after children and her sister's household and now the man she had always wanted to marry is offering her a life that is just the same. She is expected to keep him company and take care of the children. As the phrasing above indicates, she is not thinking of marrying him for romantic reasons, rather of complying with the terms of what he is offering, to get something in her favour. And what she really wants is to be able to get out of Roscarmony, and go back to Dublin, take up her degree and finish it. Marriage would put her in a position to do so, and she tells herself that she can probably get used to Mark, and fall in love again, although it is clear that the only appeal of the situation for her lies in going back to Dublin. The word 'escape' keeps coming back to her mind, and it is not difficult for a reader to make the connection between this character and James Joyce's 'Eveline'. Like her sister, Eveline's mother had died, and, on closer analysis, neither of them ended their days in the best of their mental health, 'that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness' (*Dubliners*, 41). Eveline also had to take over and look after her father, and her siblings, and like Dervla, the word 'escape' is always at the back of her mind. Both of them are longing to escape from domestic paralysis and they both consider marriage as a way out. The difference is that in Dervla's case the relationship is bilaterally loveless, whereas, although not much information is provided, Eveline's sailor seems to be in love with her. Eveline, on the other hand, does not share such passion, she appears to be interested in being able to leave her house and her future, more than in desiring male company: 'First of all it had been an excitement for her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him' (*Dubliners*, 40). This quote indicates that the liking only came later, and, furthermore, 'like' is a rather mild way to describe a feeling that would supposedly make someone want to flee their own home, and sail into the unknown. When reflecting upon whether she should go or not, she thought of Frank as her saviour, she considered that he would 'give her life, perhaps love, too' (*Dubliners*, 41), and the word order is quite clear as far as her priorities are concerned. Moreover, towards the end of the story, as he continues to cry out for her and it becomes obvious that she will not go, she stands there, passive, and 'her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or



recognition' (*Dubliners*, 43). Thus, Eveline cannot bring herself to go with Frank into a brand new life overseas out of fear, out of being too rooted in her familiar life to be able to change. And that is when her story and Dervla's take different roads. Dervla's character could be thought of as an updated version of Eveline's story, for, although her trajectory starts the same way, Dervla finds another way out. It is not fear that is holding her back, it is more that 'there were days when she wasn't sure that she could be a married woman, having been herself for so many years (116). Therefore, in this line of reasoning, being married obviously does not allow her to be herself, and that is what is bothering her. 'He wasn't seducing her, but courting her, as if she was a farmer's daughter, up for grabs' (116). If Eveline could not find in herself enough courage to venture and go ahead, and if Dervla is being analysed as an updated version of the famous short-story, it could appear, at first glance, that what this character should do is overcome her own fears and embark on this marriage. Although Eveline's main fear might have been of leaving a familiar scenario, that was not the only one. Standing on the platform she felt that he would drown her, that she cannot be sure that marriage will not take her from one form of domestic prison to another, and Dervla also knows that such a pragmatic marriage would do just that. The reason why I'm calling it an updated version is not that Dervla chose the path Eveline did not, but rather that she found yet another path for herself, one that would become a lot more fulfilling. Eveline had never considered that she could be simply on her own. Of course, this story takes place at a time when it was not easy for women to follow such a path. Dervla's story is set in a different time, and when Mark finally proposes, he finds himself faced with a harsh reality check:

I thought about marrying you. I don't love you any more, but I thought about marrying you for practical reasons. You won't be offended by that, I know. Because I don't imagine for a moment that you love me or ever did. You are looking for a wife, not a lover. (...) When I thought that I might marry you, I thought about all the advantages, like living in Dublin and going back to university. When I decided that I couldn't bare to be married to you, it struck me that I could do all that anyway, without having to bring up your children or stand behind you at academic drinks parties. This is my last chance, and I'm not going to throw it away so that you can have a replacement for Liz. (128)

In this sense, Dervla and Debora are probably the most independent women in the fiction of Frank Ronan, and their characterization is not constructed in relation to any other character.

With the character of Evelyn Cotton, despite being a central character, that is not so much the case. On the one hand, it is not, like other female characters presented in this analysis, that she is characterized in order to enhance the qualities or flaws of anybody else. However, as mentioned before, the title of the novel is *The Men who loved Evelyn Cotton*, and the story revolves around her relationship with those men, who have always been a part of her life. Never in the narrative is Evelyn alone, i.e. single, and neither does she come across as able to conceive her life that way, although she becomes an acclaimed feminist writer. Different degrees of dependence are shown throughout the book, and this dependence is one of its key themes.

Right from the beginning of the story, as Evelyn becomes a single mother, the narrator confesses his desire to save her from what he assumes will be her fate and make her dependent on him. Not only that, as he realises, much to his surprise, that he is not the only one.

One of the reasons I had almost broken my heart over Evelyn when she was in Clapham was that I thought she was a spoiled creature in the eyes of the world. I thought no man would want to marry her. I thought that no man would rear another man's child. I was prepared to make a great sacrifice of my own respectability, out of my love and pity for Evelyn. I was surprised, then, to find that she was in demand. Men seemed to be drawn to this unmarried mother in droves. It seems that if you are a girl and want a husband, and any old husband will do, you must first have a child. Perhaps it is because your fertility is proven. Perhaps a man will feel that he has the upper hand from the beginning. Perhaps these men require gratitude above everything in their partner. And, also, it is nice to feel that you are doing someone a favour. (16)

All these men were searching for a companion who had a debt of gratitude to them. The Don, the first man she married, appeared to want or demand nothing more from her and that was the reason why her first marriage ended. Evelyn soon realised this, and although she did feel grateful towards him, she could understand how this phenomenon operated: 'As a writer, she evolved a theory in which gratitude was the greatest single evil. Gratitude which is imposed on women to keep them in their place' (13). The logic is simple, by marrying someone who owes you, you are ensuring that you will always get your way and destabilizing the power balance of the relationship in your favour. Later on in the book, in the voice of another character (Hugh Langford) gratitude is considered a fault (140).

With her second marriage, because she had a child, she experienced the same kind of demand for gratitude for what she was being given. The narrator, spending more time with her than her own husband, Charles Felix, came to realise that in order to fulfil her husband's need for gratitude, and in order to make him believe that he was in control, she hid her own intelligence and made an effort to play the part that she believed she was supposed to.

'I had hours on end alone with Evelyn, of talking and soul-searching and all that stuff that is so riveting to the young. I began to realise how intelligent she was. That she was a lot cleverer than me or Charles, but her cleverness was latent and disguised, as though she herself was frightened by it. She was filling the role she had been given with a mania for perfection. The studio began to look more like an illustration from "Houses & Gardens" than a bohemian den. Things were washed and scrubbed as soon as they had been used. She sat up until late at night making clothes for Benedict and herself. (18-19)

She is described as being afraid of her own cleverness, and the most plausible reason for this fear is that she does not want her husband to find out that his idea of an upper-hand in their marriage is nothing more than an illusion that she indulges. Her 'mania for perfection' clearly comes from her need to create that illusion, from her desire to become what she imagines he wants of her. Evelyn can act out what she thinks femininity should be, or what society leads her to believe it is, especially in terms of submission to male authority. In her work, Brownmiller dubs femininity 'a desperate strategy of appeasement' (*Femininity*, 16), and explains that:

One works at femininity by accepting restrictions, by limiting one's sights, by choosing an indirect route, by scattering concentration and not giving one's all as man would to his own, certifiably, masculine interests. (*Femininity*, 16)

That second marriage also quickly came to an end. An important aspect that is dealt with in the novel is that Charles Felix was a painter and he had painted large nudes of her that she had never been very comfortable with. As her relationship crumbled, she left their home in a fury, (of course, with another man) and she tampered with the paintings, hiding her nudity by painting cotton dresses on them, and 'for the very first time since she had moved in with Felix, she felt that her body was her own' (30).

The other man is called Julius Drake, a manipulative, selfish, greedy man whom she stays with for over fifteen years. Julius was also under the impression that she

would be bound to feel the appropriate degree of gratitude, and that making her happy should not involve a lot of effort: 'He had bought her by raising her standard of life and her expectations just very slightly. He knew that, to make her happy, he would have to give her just a little more than Felix had' (32). He was thus counting on that, but what happened was something entirely different. Evelyn began to change, which makes her probably the only female character in Ronan's entire body of work to undergo such a transformation. Nevertheless, Julius is not aware of that transformation at first, for it is a gradual one:

It wasn't his intention to liberate her. He didn't know that if he gave her an inch she would become this whole new person. And so, Julius saw no more than he expected to see, and still treated Evelyn as though she was the idiot-child that he had bargained for.

Evelyn gave Julius no reason to think otherwise. If she was treated as a bimbo, then she had no choice but to play the bimbo. It was an old comfortable role that she was used to, and, in a way, it was nice to slip back into it after a hard day of being a real person. Although she was already beginning to give the impression of superhumanity to the people around her, she had no feeling of being superhuman herself. She felt overworked and harrowed and frazzled and as though she was swimming very hard and getting nowhere. (32-33)

At this point, she is already allowing other people to realise her potential, but at home and with her husband, she slips back to 'an old comfortable role', by playing dumb. Slowly things began to change and the narrator notices the first visible transformation when she started wearing contact lenses, for it was an extraordinary experience for her, to be able to see the world 'full of bright colours and defined shapes; things which people had spoken about for years and which she had never understood were suddenly clear to her' (31). This description can serve as a physical metaphor for her change, connecting bodily eyesight to her perception of the world around her. The narrator further states that she 'spoke about her lenses the way most people spoke about LSD' (31), and that 'she saw things God had never intended her to see' (32).

He realises that she now acts like a whole new person, a more confident one, having 'lost a lot of her bimbo airs and wasn't afraid to make an intelligent remark in mixed company' (32). He comes to know that, in addition to having a job, taking care of the household and the two children, she is educating herself, taking A levels by correspondence and planning to enrol for a degree in modern literature. When she

begins to succeed at her job, Julius is appalled with the idea and makes her, in front of his important friends, deny she has a career and say she is just a mother.

Evelyn was introduced to feminism by her friend Sally, the narrator's wife, and her first impression was one of scorn and mockery, considering feminists as 'fierce women in kilts with an unhealthy interest in other women's sex lives' (33). However, that was the year in which she began to write, although it was an activity undertaken without any ambition, with the sole purpose of helping her maintain her sanity. Her husband never took any notice of her, or when he did, it was to criticize her or put her down. When she began her first novel, she thought of it simply as her reaction to this situation, it was not as if she had any revolutionary goal or any deliberate feminist agenda.

It was a novel about herself as she thought others saw her at the time. The subject was an odious, inadequate, miserable woman who was far too fat and whom nobody could love. She punished this woman for the body of the book and then, feeling sorry for her at the end, vindicated her. It took seven months of early mornings in the kitchen to finish her work and, at the end of it, she felt better about herself and about her life; And she looked for no more from the experience. (37)

It was, nonetheless, about to become published world-wide, as the ideals of feminism spread, as Evelyn's novel was caught in the middle, without her ever calling herself a feminist. It was not as if she could not see the legitimacy of the movement, but given that she 'hadn't been enrolled of her own free will, there was no question of her applying the principles of sisterhood to her own life' (40). From her first novel onwards, the wheels of change kept rolling slowly, and her character, although going through different stages and phases, including one in which she stopped writing for she felt she had nothing more to say, grew stronger and stronger. And even though, as mentioned earlier, she never found herself unattached relationship wise, her sense of independence and self-worth never ceased to increase throughout the narrative:

For the first time in their marriage, the struggle between them was approaching equality.

Evelyn and Julius were not the same couple that we saw in the Bennet's sitting-room four years ago. In the time from that moment when Evelyn first stopped believing every word that came from Julius, she had become a stronger, a more independent woman. She had detached herself from Julius. She no longer needed his good opinion, his approbation for everything that she did; and because she no longer needed it, he could no longer have power over her by withholding it. Since they had moved to Ryme,

she had had the thinking time, in all those thousands of hours of gardening, to review her state, to conduct a mental analysis of Julius. She had decided that, although she probably could not do without it, it was possible that she could manipulate him to the same extent that he had always manipulated her. (88)

Another way of analysing femininity and gendered behaviour within this context is to take a closer look at *hOme*'s main character Coorg and his passion for glam rock, given that this music movement is closely connected with the concept of gender-bending and reinventing identity through androgyny. However androgyny has to do with the blurring of the sexes, with eliminating the line that separates femininity and masculinity, and the most remarkable thing about Coorg's relationship with glitter rock is that he is not interested in combining the specific markers of the two traditionally distinct genders; his concern seems to be focused on distancing himself from Kieran's somewhat forced attempts of over-masculinisation. One example of the way Coorg feels intimidated by Kieran's displays of masculinity is when the latter finds pornographic magazines under his uncle's mattress and shows them to Coorg, leaving him extremely uncomfortable (143). Another such example takes place when Coorg specifically confides to the reader that the effect Kieran's behaviour has on him is directly related to his admiration of the possibilities of glam rock:

As for the telly, that was RTE, and RTE could be depended on to keep our screen free of the cross-dressing incubi that passed for musicians across the water. If it hadn't been for Kieran and his footballers I might never have got the glam rock bug in the first place. (116)

This passage is quite clear in demonstrating that 'the glam rock bug' was triggered not just by itself but the fact the feels he needs to counteract Kieran's persistence in trying to behave the way he thinks a man should. Coorg's reaction represents the significance of glam rock concerning gender behaviour and the possibility of rebellion against the traditionally masculine.

By the 1970s, the rock and roll scene was mainly a men's world, and the women who fought to find their space ended up adapting to that prevailing masculinity in order to prove themselves. In a study on androgyny as expressed through the lyrics and words of The Smiths, 'Morrissey's Fourth Gender', Taina Viitamäki writes that:

The women of the 1970s slowly but surely made ground for themselves in the field of rock music, but only as interlopers. Women did not bring femininity into rock; they

adapted themselves to masculine requirements. The toughest guy of the rock world of the 1970s was not Mick Jagger, but Janis Joplin.

It was within this scenery that glam was born, with its desire to break away from gender moulds and its opening up of possibilities of identity by putting forward the notion that sexuality did not have to be a matter of nature but of choice and creation, expressed through fashion and make-up. Todd Haynes, writer and director of *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a film that can easily be read as a celebration of glam rock, has conveyed in an interview printed in the introduction of his book, *Velvet Goldmine*, containing the script for the film, that:

Also, I think the entire suggestion that glam rock presents to us about sexuality is one of liberation from the notion of sexuality as a fixed, biologically determined state. Like identity itself, glam suggests that sexuality is almost a creative property that we have at our disposal – a medium of self-expression that we can paint and repaint. (*Velvet Goldmine*, xxv)

In the same interview, he also re-asserts his opinion, an opinion that is illustrated throughout the entire movie, that ‘the perfect manifestation of the glam era’ (xii) was embodied by the figure of Oscar Wilde, especially in the sense that: ‘glam came out of the English tradition of camp and applied counter-philosophies about art and culture, which I saw originating from Oscar Wilde’ (xii). Throwing Oscar Wilde into the mix makes it even harder to ignore the appeal of homosexuality as an alternate sexuality. Glam was about subverting gender stereotypes, and it was impossible to know for sure about the musicians’ sexuality, for their acts were performed by their onstage personae. Thus, all the questions regarding their sexual orientations remained to be answered inside their viewers’ minds and fantasies. David Bowie, for instance claimed to be gay, which he denied later, although Bowie’s real sexuality was not the important issue, but rather what he brought onto the stage. Glam was not about authenticity, far from it, it had to do with construction and with demonstrating how by constructing personae onstage, art could imitate life, in the sense that heterosexual identity was no less a matter of social construction. Therefore, the movement of glam rock as a sexual revolution is frequently linked to feminism or the gay liberation movement. Jim Lyons confides, in an interview to *Village Voice*, that ‘There’s a clear nostalgia for that period when we believed that we were going to have a better and better society, and that feminism would win, and homosexuality would be completely accepted’, admitting that

even for straight people it was considered cool to come across as gay or bisexual. Jon Savage, in his article 'Divine Decadence', explains how glam rock was responsible for 'pushing the social envelope':

It took under five years from the first, partial decriminalization of homosexuality in the U.K. to the first out gay pop star: David Bowie's presence made non-mainstream sexuality accessible, attractive even, to a vast audience who had not dared to explore the possibilities until the glitter rockers flashed like meteors in front of their eyes. (Divine Decadence)

In this article, Savage characterized this movement as having 'built itself around fashion fantasy' and its excess as 'steeped in gay-derived self-awareness and parodic absurdity', replacing a 'dour bearded machismo' for 'blissful, trashy androgyny' (Divine Decadence). Haynes sees it as a sexual revolution, by antagonizing mainstream culture, not only by flaunting a sexual ambivalence that opened new possibilities of identification, but also in the sense that it turned sexuality into a political stand. Although he observes that the revolution goes beyond what one does in bed, he connects it with a new political awareness in which 'what you do in bed, and who you are privately, defines who you are culturally' (*Velvet Goldmine*, xxv). He perceives this political awareness of the private sphere as something that came out of feminism and the gay liberation movement. That was not just a sexual revolution inasmuch as a revolution of identity, by politicizing personal choices. Haynes also acknowledges the presence of the homoerotic as a powerful means of reinvention, alternative and expression:

I think glam rock was the first overt alignment of the notion of the alien with the notion of the homosexual – both of which became this fantastic, galvanizing potential for musical expression, a potential freedom for kids trapped in their dreary lives. (*Velvet Goldmine*, xii)

It was this potential freedom that attracted Coorg in the first place, for he makes perfectly clear that it was not about the music. He keeps fantasizing that he is talking to David Cassidy, whom he had already heard on television, but when he tells us about the other posters he had chosen to adorn his room with, in open defiance to Kieran's footballers, posters of David Bowie, Marc Bolan, the Sweet and Alvin Stardust, he admits that he had 'no idea what these people sounded like' (*hOme*, 115). 'The rest of them had earned their places', he tells us, 'by dressing up alone' (115). It is therefore



easy to realise that Coorg's interest had only arisen due to the clothing and makeup, and the possibilities it opened. In the context of glam, these were powerful means of expressing oneself, of fabricating identities at will, a new, exciting and subversive way to challenge accepted behaviours, and present alternatives. The emphasis was in that you took the creative role as far as your identity was concerned, especially in terms of clothing and sexuality. Author Richard Grossinger claims in this context that the notion of celebrity is used as a sort of forum through which the audience is able to renegotiate what might constitute acceptable social attitudes and behaviours. More light is shed on the matter of glam rockers vs. footballers in the following passage:

It is hard to say how much Kieran liked football. He never played it or watched it, but all the same his half of our room was covered from floor to ceiling with pictures of footballers, with row upon row of men with folded arms. That was how you knew where his territory was and you didn't enter it, except to cross the door, without risking a tap of his knuckles. I felt I had to do something to counteract his lowering army, and then I discovered a magazine called "Music Star", with posters of louche men in eyeshadow, and began to build my defences.

David Bowie had already been mobilised in other guises. He was always a bit scary looking, (...) and there was something unsettling about Marc. Unlike though it might seem, the Marc Bolan I knew when I lived in England was a shy-looking thing, and I hadn't made the connection between this glitter-teared icon and the wizard of Woburn Abbey. (*hOme*, 117)

Firstly, one needs to take into consideration that the glitter factor, the clothes and make up were so powerful, that he hadn't even recognized Marc Bolan. Another remarkable aspect is the fact that Kieran's passion for football is questioned. He does not play or watch the sport, and still he fills his walls with its stars. It seems highly plausible to assume that Kieran's interest in these pictures would be far more related to a desired ideal of masculinity that he had set out to achieve than sport. Imagining a teenage room covered with posters, one side filled with football stars by a kid who does not watch sport, the other filled with glittery musicians whose music Coorg has never heard, it is impossible not to ponder about gender performativity. Each of them is engaged in identifying with images of what they feel like they should be. American feminism and queer studies theorist Judith Butler is one of the scholars who claims that gender does not exist as something natural, it is only real in terms of performance. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), she explains the concept of gender performativity, illustrating that gender specific behaviours are the product of imposed and learned performance, rather than an obvious,

natural, biologically induced binary behaviour of two opposite sexes. Thus, in this line of thought, this sort of behaviour is nothing more than a social construction, imposed through the logic of the naturalness of compulsory heterosexuality and the commonly accepted lack of alternatives, designed to create a fictitious form of control. Joan Riviere has dealt with this subject as well and devoted her essay 'Womanliness as Masquerade' to the reading of womanliness as something that can be worn and assumed as a mask, arguing that the markers people normally use to distinguish between sexes are artificial constructions. Within this reasoning, it becomes clearer as to the function of the posters in the room. To Kieran, they have nothing to do with football, but with recognizable markers of masculinity. Kieran, as well as Coorg, is in a difficult situation, being brought up in a rather oppressive environment, with many unanswered questions as to his origins. They are both unaware of the identity of their fathers, and are being brought up by someone other than their parents. In this sense, some kind of rebellion is naturally in order. Thus, for Kieran it is easy to imagine that the appeal of masculinity, and the self-imposed effort to achieve it, is closely connected with the desire of growing up as quickly as possible, and the allure of independence. Footballers, with their muscular bodies, their supposedly manly behaviour in the field, and sometimes off it as well, allied to the respect and adulation from the public, serve as the perfect image of what Kieran is attempting to achieve and he keeps constantly experimenting and testing what he considers masculine behaviour on Coorg. However, while Kieran aims at socially accepted (and convenient, for they allow him to control and intimidate Coorg, as well, as reaching adulthood faster) behaviours, Coorg is drawn to whatever he can find to antagonize such oppressive masculinity. By turning to glam rock, he is inadvertently becoming aware of how highly constructed gender identities can be and the degree of performativity underlying the concept of masculinity. One such example is the way that his Bowie poster upsets and disturbs him. He accurately describes the picture in the poster so that any fan of glam rock music is able to realise that the object of his confusion is none other than Bowie's alter-ego character Ziggy Stardust. In the context of gender identity and construction, the character of Ziggy Stardust is highly enlightening in understanding how glam rock operated in terms of subversion of traditional male/female stereotypes. As argued above, this subversion did not work only in terms of androgyny and the blurring of gender behaviours, it had more to do with presenting alternatives, and this is where Ziggy comes in. Bowie is attributed with having created rock's first prepackaged persona and his fictitious character is not

exactly a man or a woman, gay, bisexual or heterosexual; Ziggy was an alien rock superstar, who came down to Earth from outer-space five years before the Earth's supposed ending. In 'Loving the Alien: Ziggy Stardust and Self-Conscious Celebrity', Suzanne Rintoul investigates the significance of the concepts of celebrity and stardom. Rintoul finds ironic that Bowie achieved his larger-than-life celebrity status 'not by aligning himself with a figure who seemed representative of mainstream ideology, but by aligning himself with one who could be the poster 'boy' for the margin'. In examining Bowie's performance of celebrity, she argues that it 'points to persona production as much as his drag gestures towards gender constructedness' (Rintoul). In this line of thought, she reads his subversion not only in terms of gender, but also through his embodying a prefabrication of what the audience needs before it realises it, providing a mass consumption ready made superstar before having been made one. 'The difference between Ziggy Stardust and most celebrities', Rintoul contends, 'is that, as a *performance* of celebrity, he reveals the machinery behind the prefabrication of what an audience longs for or needs' (Rintoul). In the same way that Bowie's ingenious marketing strategy discloses the machinery behind stardom, his performance of gender exposes the machinery or the artificial construction of gender behaviours, attire, or mannerisms. Lucy O'Brien considers androgyny and the skill to create and transform themselves as a major asset to any star. In her own words:

The major mark of stars is their ability to transform themselves, to be attracted to both men and women. The most successful stars, then - from Little Richard and Elvis to Prince and Michael Jackson - have both Jungian qualities of masculine and feminine on display. Their mental wardrobe contains a world of possibilities and permutations; when your star is in the firmament, why restrict yourself to something as prosaic as gender? (243)

In conclusion, the aim of this chapter has been the analysis of some of the most significant female characters in Ronan's narratives, so as to investigate the images of femininity represented by means of the way these women are portrayed. Coorg's aunts in *hOme*, Sally and Netty, are two opposite poles on the scale of traditional femininity, in terms of appearance, and also role, for one stays at home cooking and singing, while the other takes care of the candy store. However, there is no real difference in terms of basic human qualities, such as kindness, and reliability, and furthermore, it is interesting to note that these women appear in contrast with each other, and not with any other male character, and that they are victims of oppression, but at the hands of their own

strict mother. Debora is another of the characters examined in this chapter, due to the way she stands out in the hippy community. Like most of the other female characters, she is under-characterized and one never really gets to know what keeps her there if she is so fundamentally against most of the community's beliefs. She is the only one in such a place that it appears one is to take seriously and the fact that she is not willing to be led by a man who is obviously incompetent and a liar, earns her the reputation of being a lesbian. Dervla, John G.'s aunt from *The Better Angel*, stands for an updated version of James Joyce's 'Eveline', for she is faced with the same dilemma. However, she does find a way to get round it without the answer being necessarily either marriage or inertia. Evelyn Cotton, on the other hand, is the only character that gets to change and grow, throughout the story, going through different stages of emotional dependence, until she reaches a point where she not only resists being manipulated, but also starts to realise that she too is able to play that game. However independent she grows to be, being actually alone is a scenerio that never really enters her mind.

These women demonstrate different images, concepts and ideals of femininity, according to or subverting acceptable stereotypes, but mostly standing out from all the other female characters in Ronan's different works, who symbolize little more than a tool with which one is able to view other (male) characters closer. These varied ways of playing with femininity, and these specific characters and their relation to it, as well as the weight attributed to glam rock in *hOme*, show very clearly how it comes to be performed, or acted out, according to need, or the moral rigidity of the surrounding society, and not necessarily for one's own benefit.

# Conclusion

The main goal for this dissertation was to examine the way Irish gay discourse has been constructed and dealt with in a contemporary context. Bearing this in mind, and considering the difficulty of analysing every author who has produced gay literature in Ireland, the focus of this study was placed on only one author, whose entire work served as a case study for this investigation. Frank Ronan might not come across as an obvious choice. Other Irish authors, such as Colm Tóibín or Jamie O'Neill, for instance, could, arguably, seem more representative of the subject, in the sense that in their novels the connection between the birth of the Irish nation and the struggle towards the acceptance of different or alternative sexualities might appear more evidently referred to the formation of new identities and mentalities. However, the characters in their novels are not as illustrative of the contemporary non-apologetic era in Irish gay writing and therefore not ideal to be studied as a symbol or a consequence of the radical change in tone that this new generation of gay authors exhibits in relation to a relatively recent past.

Reed Woodhouse, in his *Unlimited Embrace*, when considering the way images of homosexuality have been conveyed in gay fiction, declares that 'the best, and most dangerous, gay literature refuses to turn gay men into victims' (10-11). He is discussing the American gay male, but this might easily be true for any gay person, as he argues that 'the American faggot is not content to be innocent, cute or helpless' (11), for he believes that gay identity should be acknowledged, as opposed to wished away or exaggerated. It was precisely this idea of confidence that attracted me to Ronan's work, the avoiding too-easy narratives of gayness, the refusal of the victim syndrome, the expanding of the problems and characteristics of a gay person as other than their homosexuality.

In the first chapter of this thesis, the difference between the approaches of queer theory, and gay/lesbian studies were highlighted, given that queer theory derives from gay studies, but seeks to go somewhat further, in the sense that the latter focuses on homosexual representations in literature, working to investigate how normal and deviant sexual categories are enforced and operate. The former, however, attempts to expand such an investigation, so that it does not stop at the examining of these categories, but at

the subversion of these labels. The idea behind this approach is not a simple investigation of the diverse identities expressed in literature, but the questioning of the very notion of identity. In 'Queer Theory: Destabilizing Gender', Karen Melanson describes the goals of this field of study as the 'attempt to break through binary thinking and begin the fight against gender stereotypes through its refusal of labels and its demonstration of the social action of gender identity' (Queer Theory: Destabilizing Gender). In order to achieve this, queer theory expanded its scope from representations of homosexuality in literature and the way it has been historically defined against its binary opposite, heterosexuality, to the representation of anything deviant, not only sexually, but also in terms of gender, class, race, or any of the components that form an identity. This critique of identity claims that one cannot, or rather, should not be categorized based on one single characteristic, and that is why Ronan's characters seem more suitable for this kind of analysis, because they allow for an investigation of the 'social action of gender identity', for the identity issues of these characters are not limited to their own homosexuality, but to the cultural and historical context around them.

Professor Warren Hedges explains queer theory in the following manner:

Queer theorists read texts with a great degree of specificity, attending to what characters take pleasure in, how this is tied to historically specific circumstances, and the representational dynamics and dilemmas in which characters find themselves enmeshed.

While queer theorists are actively interested in same-sex dynamics, these dynamics are not evaluated against contemporary gay and lesbian identities by using the yardstick of the coming out narrative. In other words, queer theorists avoid a teleological view of sexuality and identity, and avoid characterizing any identity as lacking or incomplete. In fact, characters may prove interesting precisely because they parody or disrupt received identities, or reveal the contingencies of any identity. (Queer Theory Explained)

Within this line of reasoning, it must be said that this dissertation was not meant to be perceived as neither a comprehensive study of contemporary Irish gay discourse nor an all-inclusive analysis of all the issues and questions raised in Frank Ronan's entire body of work, but an examination of his work in context, investigating the expression of homosexuality as related to other aspects of Irish life, as well as the manifestation of these other aspects in the construction of a contemporary gay discourse and identity.

Given the close relationship between Ireland and the Catholic Church, and the immense influence of the Church when it comes to the way homosexuality has been and continues to be seen, that was the first subject dealt with, in the second chapter. Many of Ronan's characters display rocky relationships with the Catholic Church, producing appropriate subjects for the study of the relationship between the Catholic faith and different kinds of dissident identities and lifestyles. In *hOme*, Ronan has a child questioning and parodying the myths and dogmas of the Catholic Church. This child was brought up within a hippy community and then taken to Ireland, illustrating by contrast the strict rules (mostly imposed by the Church) of the social fabric of Irish rural areas, while his total ignorance of any form of religion allows him to look at it, having reservations about things people take for granted without thinking twice. The most recurrent emotion we can find in his narrative is fear, as he shows the way he ended up complying with all of the Church teachings that were instilled in him, out of fear of the consequences and fear of even wanting to know the reasons for adopting behaviours he does not understand. Both in *hOme* and in *The Better Angel*, attention is given to the way in which the education system is unflatteringly portrayed, depicting how Church teachings are implemented in children from the beginning and information is withheld. Although John G.'s relationship with religion changes throughout the book, the narrative is also highly evocative of emotions such as fear, guilt and shame of one's own body and desires, control tactics used by the Church to make anyone with inclinations that fall outside of their clear rules to feel that they are abnormal and should therefore conform with 'proper' behaviour. Also described in *The Better Angel* is the issue of homosexuality within the priesthood, as the local priest tries to make a pass at Smallgoods. However, there is no moral judgement in the narrative about this situation and in no way is the priest characterized as a troubled person. On the contrary he seems a rather patient and generous man, which is another of the reasons which attracted me to Frank Ronan. He does not attempt to draw conclusions for his readers. Related to religion is also *Dixie Chicken*, not only because of the biblical parallels but because it is narrated by God, who does not abstain from commenting on the way the Christian faith has been conducted and on what atrocities have been committed and blamed on orders He never gave, by people He never spoke to. Lastly, two of the short stories were also analysed in this context, 'Legacy' and 'Ringsend', the first connecting homosexuality and religion in terms of discourse, using words with dual meanings, such as 'community', 'embrace', or 'spirit', whereas the latter, a sort of biblical-based gay

dystopia, offering an explanation for the Church's dismissal of homosexuality: the inability of reproduction, 'there are no insects left to pollinate the flowers' (89).

Following the analysis of the characters' relationship with the Catholic Church, other forms of relationships were studied, family and romantic. Ronan's characters' unconventional families were examined, in order to consider how the traditional family unit might seem oppressive for people who do not fit the norm, by pressuring its members towards 'acceptable' behaviour, and by the attempts to hide social transgression. One such example occurs when dealing with unwanted children, in 'Salthill' and in *The Men who Loved Evelyn Cotton*, illustrating that the main concern of the grandparents is what other people might say and think. 'Salthill' further considers a very interesting point which has to do with the fact that a healthy sex life has often to be hidden from the family, causing people to lead a sort of double life. In this family context, the figure of the Irish father and the Irish mother, and the way Ronan acknowledges and depicts stereotypes, as well as the way he subverts them, were also taken into account. The traditional image of the broken, drunken Irish father, appears in Ronan's work, particularly in *A Picnic in Eden*, a novel about the birth of a strong, close friendship between two men, one whose father commits suicide at the beginning of the narrative, and the other whose father commits suicide by the end of the book. The novel is full of images of symbolic patricide, as Adam blames his father for destroying his childhood, and dreams that he is being raped by his father, remarking sardonically that making love to your father is a less odder idea than not being loved at all. Ronan's subversion of fatherhood stereotypes consists of depicting fathers ('Salthill', *Dixie Chicken*) who look after their children and their household far more willingly and better than their partners. In the same manner, the maternal instinct is blatantly lacking in some of his female characters, defying the notion of gender-specific biological characteristics, even including a scene of domestic violence (*The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton*), in which the husband is the victim.

The other type of bonding addressed in this dissertation is related to romantic connections, which in Ronan's work take a variety of different forms, including romantic friendships. Another advantage of Ronan's fiction is that there is no strict line between friendship and love, allowing for other possibilities in between. The first thing to be noted in this context is the amount of characters who openly state their disbelief in love, marriage or relationships. Even God, the narrator of *Dixie Chicken*, bluntly asserts that he does not believe in marriage. The narrative of the book demonstrates the reasons



for this: Helen allegedly loves her husband, but is obsessed by him, feeling suffocated in her need for control and possession, Rory allegedly loves his wife but is unfaithful, and Jody and Kay admit being together out of habit and routine. In *The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton* three of her four marriages involve nothing resembling love, the first a simple trade of protection for gratitude, the second in which Felix only needed a replacement for his ex-girlfriend, especially in terms of taking care of the household, and the third, to a selfish, greedy man, interested in nothing more than power games of physical and emotional control. Adam's mother, in *A Picnic in Eden*, loved his father so much that she was blind to his addiction to alcohol, proving therefore to be unable to help him or, ultimately, to help herself. Adam himself is married, but clearly not in love, it was more a matter of common interests, of it being convenient and comfortable, but even these advantages are lost as his marriage progresses. Not even gay relationships are the exception, as can be concluded from *Lovely*. Aaron is too stubborn to admit he is wrong and too determined to change Nick to see the truth and spends the entire story telling himself otherwise and Nick seems to want Aaron's life, stability and achievements far more than he wants Aaron. Contrasting with these convenient arrangements or disastrous relationships is another form of bonding which proves to have a greater degree of success in Ronan's fiction: romantic friendships. These are the ones which survive the test of time, and defy the practical non-existence of happy endings in his work, not to mention that they display a far greater degree of understanding and intimacy, and most of all, honesty. Such examples are Smallgoods and John G. (*The Better Angel*) and Adam and Dougie (*A Picnic in Eden*), the latter with a slightly heavier sexual tension, which extended the scope of possibilities in male friendships, which, as observed in the fourth chapter, have strict rules.

Another important issue that this dissertation focused on is a key theme in contemporary Irish writing - politics. It is deeply connected to homosexual discourse, due to the logic of colonisation and post-colonisation, for the histories of gay discourse and liberation in Ireland are greatly intertwined and bear the historical marks of colonisation. Furthermore, it was demonstrated in the fifth chapter how this, along with the attempts at exclusion from the literature of a country aiming to appear strong and morally superior in relation to its coloniser, accounts for the disappointment and frustration most Irish gay writers feel concerning politics in their country and the way that is expressed in their literature. In Ronan's fiction, more precisely in *hOme*, we see that the need to project an image of strength is combined with the need to blame the

colonising country for every form of dissidence. In the same novel it is shown how Coorg is told highly biased Irish nationalist stories, which combine reality with fiction in order to come across as a morally superior country (not only Ireland, but more specifically, Catholic Ireland). This chapter also dealt with the different ideas, stereotypes and romantic images that foreign people may have of Ireland, as well as the way Irish people picture English people, suggested in Ronan's novels. Closely connected to politics is the expression of nationalism, expressed in *A Picnic in Eden* (though set mainly on Scotland, Adam becomes aware of the similarities with his own country), and *The Better Angel*, through Smallgoods rebellion and the behaviour of his father. Still regarding *The Better Angel*, the question of blind nationalism was also tackled when the boys encounter a fellow student filling the blackboard with political slogans he is obviously not too sure of the meaning of. The topic of discrimination was also analysed, not only connected to homosexuality, but in terms of the lack of tolerance towards difference in general, such as race or class. The chapter on politics concluded with the observation that Ronan seems unable to set a story involving an open gay couple or open displays of homosexuality in Ireland, for whenever these occur in the novels, they are set abroad.

Finally, this thesis looked at the female characters in Ronan's fiction in order to analyse images of femininity, and how gender stereotypes were represented or subverted. It was not a complete investigation of every female character in the novels, but a study of the women who stood out for some reason, given that most of the others seemed to serve only as a background for the full comprehension of the leading male characters. Thus, Netty's (*hOme*) conventional femininity was contrasted with her sister's lack of grace; Elsa (*The Better Angel*) was studied due to her troubled relationship with sex; Dervla's dilemma demonstrated how marriage can be viewed as a way of escaping from one's own life, but ultimately not the only way; and Evelyn Cotton, the only female character in the novels to change, although she is portrayed as a feminist who changed millions of people's lives but seems unable to consider being single and working out her own problems on her own. The very notion of femininity is also given attention to as these women prove to what extent femininity is merely performed, as an act. Also considered in this context was the importance of glam rock with respect to gender behaviour, through gender bending and its power to reinvent identity and sexuality through androgyny and self-creation, and by presenting alternatives to those who feel the need to challenge accepted behaviour. In *hOme*,

Ronan cleverly opposes Kieran's idolising of football heroes, not due to the sport itself, but to the fact that they display recognizable and socially accepted markers of masculinity, to Coorg's going in the opposite direction with his fascination for glam rockers, seeking out alternatives to that kind of behaviour, and slowly becoming aware of the extent of performativity underlying the concept of masculinity.

By bringing all of these elements together, the need to explore various aspects when studying identity becomes clearer. Through the fiction of Frank Ronan, it was possible to study the way all these different elements interconnect in the creation of a distinctive voice for contemporary Irish gay discourse, distancing itself from the past, though not forgetting it, and making itself be heard, by expanding its subjects beyond coming-out narratives or novels related to HIV losses. By not getting wrapped up in problematizing homosexuality itself, Ronan, among other authors is demonstrating how gayness might be a part of one's identity, as opposed to the totality of one's identity and also that it is impossible to produce a study of homosexuality without considering social surroundings and cultural context. In this line of thought, an inter-disciplinary encounter appears more profitable, combining gay studies, queer theory, and post-colonial studies, or at least extending the scope of these fields of study so that they meet in a more unified framework, which was what this dissertation set out to achieve - studying sexuality and homosexuality through different lenses, relating it to different aspects and studying the modulations of these aspects in their representation. Gay fiction in Ireland is recycling its past and digesting the effects of that past, incorporating it in its literature. And it is extremely exciting to be able to study these changes and progress in the literature of a country where homosexuality has been decriminalised so recently. Hopefully, in a very near future, the theme of the lack of tolerance towards gender difference, a theme that is not tackled in Frank Ronan's work, will be more and more absent from gay fiction in general, not because it is being ignored, but because it will not be an issue anymore.



# Bibliography

## Primary Bibliography:

Ronan, Frank. *A Picnic in Eden*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.

Ronan, Frank. *The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton*. London: Coronat, 1991.

Ronan, Frank. *The Better Angel*. London: Bloomsbury, 1992.

Ronan, Frank. *Dixie Chicken*. London: Sceptre, 1994.

Ronan, Frank. *Handsome Men are Slightly Sunburnt*. London: Sceptre, 1996.

Ronan, Frank. *Lovely*. London: Sceptre, 1996.

Ronan, Frank. *hOme*. London: Sceptre, 2002.

## Additional Bibliography:

Bawer, Bruce. 'Canon Fodder'.

(Originally appeared in *The Advocate*, May 16, 1995; It was reprinted in the collection *Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy*. New York: Free Press, 1996)

<http://www.indegayforum.org/news/show/26610.html>

Beliele, Kevin. 'Love's Sweet Sweet Song'. In *Chasing Danny Boy – Powerful Stories of Celtic Eros*. Ed. Mark Hemry. San Francisco, California: Palm Drive Publishing, 1999. Pp. 53 – 61.

Berman, David. 'The Gay and Lesbian Presence in American Literature'

(from the *Heath Anthology Newsletter*)

<http://www.georgetown.edu/tamlit/essays/essays.html>

Boswell, John. 'Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories'. In *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1989.

Bredbeck, Gregory W. 'Literary Theory: Gay, Lesbian and Queer'. In *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Culture*. Ed. Claude J. Summers. 2002 [www.glbtq.com/literature/lit\\_theory.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/lit_theory.html)

Bristow, Joseph. 'A complex multiform creature': Wilde's sexual Identities'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. 195 – 218.

Brownmiller, Susan. *Femininity*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1985.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990

Cady, Joseph. 'American Literature: Gay Male, 1900 – 1969'. In *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*. Ed. J. Claude Summers. 2002.  
[www.glbtq.com/literature/am\\_lit2\\_gay\\_1900\\_1969.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/am_lit2_gay_1900_1969.html)

----. 'Catholic Guilt'. In *Wikipedia*.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic\\_guilt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_guilt)

Cohen, Ed. *Talk of the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse in Male Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

----. *Coming Out: Irish Gay Experiences*. Ed. Glen O'Brien. Dublin: Currach Press, 2003.

Conrad, Kathryn. *Locked in the Family Cell – Gender, Sexuality & Political Agency in Irish National Discourse*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

Cullen, Bill. Interview to AuthorsOnTheWeb.com, 2003.  
<http://www.authorsontheweb.com/features/0303-irish/irish-q5.asp>

De Valera, Eamon. Radio Speech given to the Nation, on the 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1943.  
As quoted in: <http://www.loyno.edu/history/journal/Hennessy.htm>

Edwards, Ruth Dudley. *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure*. Dublin: Irish Academic Pr., 1996.

Ellis, Peter Berresford. 'Revisionism in Irish Historical Writing: The New Anti-Nationalist School of Historians'. In *Irish Democrat*. 2001.  
(The original broadsheet publication was printed and published by Connolly Publications Ltd and distributed by The Four Provinces Bookshop, London)  
<http://www.irishdemocrat.co.uk/bookshop/publications/revisionism/>

Engels, Freidrich. *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*. [1884]. New York: Pathfinder Press, 2000.

Faderman, Lilian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Finnegan, Brian. 'Introduction'. In *Quare Fellas*. Ed. Brian Finnegan. Dublin: Basement Press, 1994. Pp. 5 – 12.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality – Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley [1978]. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Fritscher, Jack. 'Chasing Danny Boy'. In *Chasing Danny Boy – Powerful Stories of Celtic Eros*. Ed. Mark Hemry. San Francisco, California: Palm Drive Publishing, 1999. Pp. 79 – 98.

----. 'Gay/Lesbian Liberation'

<http://www.geocities.com/youth4sa/fi-glb.html>

(Resolution adopted by the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International, 2003)

Grossinger, Richard. *Martian Homecoming at the All-American Revival Church*. Plainfield: North Atlantic Books, 1974.

Halperin, David. 'Pal O' Me Heart'. In *London Review of Books*. May, 2003.

<http://www.iol.ie/~atswim/atswim/reviews/uklr.html>

Haynes, Todd. *Velvet Goldmine*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

Hedges, Warren. 'Queer Theory Explained'. 1997

<http://www.sou.edu/English/Hedges/Sodashop/RCenter/Theory/Explained/queer.htm>

Inglis, Tom. *Moral Monopoly – The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998.

Jñanavira, Dharmachari (Mark McLelland). 'Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition'. In *Western Buddhist Review Vol. 3*. Ed. Dharmachari Abhaya.

<http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol3/homosexuality.html>

Joy Division. 'Love Will Tear Us Apart'. 1979. From the Album *Substance – 1977 – 1980*. Lyrics by Ian Curtis. Factory, 1988.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. [1914]. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Kaye, A. Richard. 'Gay Studies/Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde'. In *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*. Ed. Frederick S. Roden. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. 189 – 223.

Kennedy, Hubert. 'Karl Ulrichs' first theorist of homosexuality'. In *Science and Homosexuality*. Ed. Vernon A. Rosario. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Lang, Robert. 'My own Private Idaho and the New Queer Road Movies'. In *Masculine Interests*. Robert Lang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Pp. 243 – 262.

Latimer, Tirza True. 'The Closet'. In *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*. Ed. Claude J. Summers. 2004  
[www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/closet.html](http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/closet.html)

Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988.

Lind, Amy and Share, Jessica. 'Queering Development: Institutionalized Heterosexuality in Development Theory, Practice and Politics in Latin America' in *Feminist Futures: Re-Imagining Women, Culture and Development* eds. Bhavnani, Kum-Kum, Foran, John and Kurian, Priya. Zed Press. 2003. Pp. 55-73.

Mac Gréil, Micheál. *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited*. Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 1996.

Marx, K. Engels, F. *Manifesto do Partido Comunista*. Trans. Textos Marxistas. Dinalivro: Lisboa,

McElroy, Wendy. *Sexual Correctness: The Gender-Feminist Attack on Women*. McFarland & Company, 2001.

McCabe, Patrick. *Breakfast on Pluto*. Scarborough: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

McCabe, Patrick. *The Butcher Boy*. New York: Delta, 1994

McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

McGrath, Anthony. 'Raindancing'. In *Quare Fellas*. Ed. Brian Finnegan. Dublin: Guernsey Press, 1994. Pp. 113 – 120.

McGrath, Geoff. 'Growing Up Gay in the '90s'. In *Coming Out: Irish Gay Experiences*. Ed. Glen O'Brien. Dublin: Currach Press, 2003. Pp. 211 – 222.

Melanson, Karen. 'Queer Theory: Destabilizing Gender'.  
<http://www.tulane.edu/~femtheory/journals/paper3.html>

Mohanram, Radhika. 'Postcolonial Spaces and Deterritorialized (Homo)sexuality: The films of Hanif Kureish'. In *Postcolonial Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts: Theory and Criticism*. Eds Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan. London: Greenwood Press. 1995. Pp. 117 – 134.

Moran, Thomas. Interview to AuthorsOntTheWeb.com, 2003.  
<http://www.authorsontheweb.com/features/0303-irish/irish-q5.asp>

Mugabe, Robert.  
As quoted in 'Behind the Mask: A website on gay and lesbian affairs in Africa'.  
<http://www.mask.org.za/sections/AfricaPerCountry/zimbabwe/zimbabwepress1.html>



- Norris, David. In *Outsmart Magazine*. June, 2004.  
(Interview to *Outsmart Magazine*, June, 2004).  
<http://www.outsmartmagazine.com/issue/i04-01/irish.html>
- Norton, Rictor. *A Critique of Social Constructionism and Postmodern Queer Theory*. June 2002, expanded July 2002.  
<http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/extracts.htm>
- O'Brien, Lucy. *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.
- O'Neill, Jamie. *At Swim, Two Boys*. London: Scribner, 2002.
- . 'Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression'  
<http://www.geocities.com/youth4sa/fi-women.html>  
(Excerpt from resolution passed by the World Congress of the Fourth International 1979. The entire resolution is available in pamphlet form from Socialist Action/Walnut Publishing at 3425 Cesar Chavez St., San Francisco, CA 94110.)
- Paglia, Camille. *Vamps & Tramps*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Pearse, Pádraig. 'Little Lad of The Tricks'. 1909.  
<http://www.ucc.ie:8080/cocoon/celt/E950004-009>
- . 'Religious Shame'. In *Wikipedia*  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shame#Religious\\_shame](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shame#Religious_shame)
- Richlin, Amy. 'Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law against Love between Men'. In *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3. 1992.
- Rintoul, Suzanne. 'Loving the Alien: Ziggy Stardust and Self-Conscious Celebrity'. In *M/C Journal*. Ed. P. David Marshall. Issue 5. November, 2004.  
<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0411/03-rintoul.php>
- Riviere, Joan. 'Womanliness as Masquerade'. 1986.  
[http://www.ncf.edu/hassold/WomenArtists/riviere\\_womanliness\\_as\\_masquerade.htm](http://www.ncf.edu/hassold/WomenArtists/riviere_womanliness_as_masquerade.htm)
- Savage, Jon. 'Divine Decadence: Memoirs of Glam'. In *Gadfly*. October, 1998.  
<http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/October98/archive-glam.html>
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.
- Showalter, Elaine. As quoted in Ann Weekes Owen. *Irish Women: An Uncharted Tradition*. Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1990.
- Sinfeld, Alan. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*. London: Cassell, 1994.

Smyth, Ailbhe. 'Foreword'. In *Alternative Loves; Irish Gay and Lesbian Stories*. Ed. David Marcus. Dublin: Marino Press, 1994.

Stanton, Michael. 'Novel: Gay Male'. In *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*. Ed. J. Claude Summers. 2002.  
[http://www.glbtq.com/literature/novel\\_gay.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/novel_gay.html)

Summers, Claude J. 'Roman Catholicism'. In *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*. Ed. Claude J. Summers. 2004  
[http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/roman\\_catholicism.html](http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/roman_catholicism.html)

Taggart, Martin. 'Priesthood – No Place to Hide'. In *Coming Out: Irish Gay Experiences*. Ed. Glen O'Brien. Dublin: Currach Press, 2003. Pp. 223 – 227.

Taubin Amy. 'All that Glitters'. In *Village Voice*. November 18, 1997. Pp. 64 - 66.

Tóibín, Colm. *Love in a Dark Time (and Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature)*. New York: Scribner, 2002.

Tóibín, Colm. 'New Ways of Killing Your Father'. In *London Review of Books*. November, 1993.  
<http://www.colmtoibin.com/essays/lrb/CTLRB18Nov1993.htm>

Viitamäki, Taina. 'Morrissey's Fourth Gender'.  
<http://shoplifters.morrissey-solo.com/union/taina/morriss.htm>

Walshe, Éibhear. 'Introduction: Sex, Nation and Dissent'. In *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*. Ed. Éibhear Walshe. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997. Pp. 1 – 15.

Watkins, John. 'Romantic Friendship: Male'. In *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*. Ed. J. Claude Summers. 2002.  
[http://www.glbtq.com/literature/romantic\\_friendship\\_m.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/romantic_friendship_m.html)

Weiniger, Otto. *Sex and Character*. London: William Heineman, 1906.  
<http://www.theabsolute.net/ottow/schareng.pdf>

Wheatcroft, Geoffrey. 'Nor Green, Nor Red Nor Pink'. In *The Atlantic Monthly*. May, 2003.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/prem/200305/wheatcroft>

Woodhouse, Reed. *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945 – 1995*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Woods, Gregory. 'Gay Literature' [18<sup>th</sup> July 2002]. In *The Literary Encyclopedia*. The Literary Dictionary Company, 2007.  
<http://www.litencyc.com/php/topics.php?rec=true&UID=1211>

Woods, Gregory. 'Literary Historiography and the Gay Common Reader'. In *Nordlit n. 4*. Eds. Astrid S. Brokke, Rolf Gaasland, Sandra Lee Kleppe and Henning Howlid Wærp. University of Tromsø.

<http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/4/woods.html>

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own* [1929]. London: Grafton, 1987.

Wynne, Michael. 'Puppydogs' Tails'. In *Chasing Danny Boy – Powerful Stories of Celtic Eros*. Ed. Mark Hemry. San Francisco, California: Palm Drive Publishing, 1999. pp. 21 – 25.

----. 'You're among Friends'.

<http://www.kerrygold.com/usa/pub.html>

Zimmerman, Bonnie. 'Lesbian Feminist Criticism'. In *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn. London: Methuen, 1985.

(As quoted in Woods, Gregory. 'Literary Historiography and the Gay Common Reader'. In *Nordlit n. 4*. Eds. Astrid S. Brokke, Rolf Gaasland, Sandra Lee Kleppe and Henning Howlid Wærp. University of Tromsø.

<http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/4/woods.html>)